

AIDS group says no to Bushes, yes to cancer pusher

WHEN IT was learned that George and Barbara Bush were asked to serve as honorary co-chairs of a local fundraiser for AmFar, the American Foundation for AIDS Research, howls went up all over the place from AIDS activists.

Bush didn't deserve the honor, they argued, because he had not done enough to fight the dreaded disease. The Bushes quietly withdrew from the event.

Yet, when it was announced that Philip Morris, the giant tobacco conglomerate whose products have been proven to kill people, would sponsor the AmFar event, not a peep of protest was heard.

The event is a March 19 concert featuring Liza Minnelli in conjunction with a Virginia Slims tennis tournament that will include Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova and others. Both are sponsored by Philip Morris' Virginia Slims.

Why the double standard?

Why was AmFar — a group that's done much good in the battle against one deadly disease — so quick to disassociate itself from Bush who, as an ex-president, can hardly be accused of harming anybody (and who, despite the charges, did not completely turn his back on AIDS while in the White House) and yet so willing to embrace one of the major purveyors of another deadly disease?



Juan R.
Palomo

This is not the first time Philip Morris has bought the acquiescence of the AIDS community. A few years ago ACT-UP protested loudly the company's support of Jesse Helms — until Philip Morris gave the organization money.

AmFar has for years had the support of Liz Taylor and other wealthy luminaries. It doesn't need to rely on Philip Morris. How much is it getting from the tobacco company in return for putting its seal of approval on Philip Morris' deadly (but legal) drug trafficking?

Dr. Mervyn Silverman, AmFar president, says he doesn't know the dollar figure but he insists his group is not endorsing smoking. He said in a phone interview that AmFar is merely trying to use women's tennis to educate young women on the dangers of AIDS because that is a group that hasn't been receptive to the warnings of that danger.

He equated tobacco with other products such as milk and sugar "that can be unhealthy to certain people." Strange

words coming from a doctor.

I'm not even going to bother with the women tennis pros and their willingness to sell their souls to the devil. They have made their priorities (big bucks) pretty clear in their refusal to say no to the Virginia Slims scheme. (King's response to reporters was that tobacco is a legal drug and she just didn't understand why anybody would be upset about it.)

But just because the women pros have no conscience does not mean the AIDS community has to follow suit. Yes, a lot more money is needed for AIDS research and treatment, but there are other ways of raising funds. Does AmFar really want to take money from an organization that pushes products that have been proven to cause cancer, which kills thousands of people each year?

As anti-smoking activist Alan Blum, said, "this is an ominous sign for the future — health charities saying, 'My disease is more important than yours.'"

Blum is the founder of DOC, Doctors Ought to Care, a nationwide organization of doctors dedicated to fighting smoking that has spent considerable time unsuccessfully trying to shame the women tennis pros into saying no to what it calls "Emphysema Slims."

"Is that really what AmFar is telling us, that AIDS is more important than

cancer? That it is willing to help Philip Morris promote carcinogenic cigarettes in order to fight AIDS? What if organized crime, or a South American drug cartel, offered money — would it take that money also?"

"How can any health organization take up with a cigarette company?" asked Blum. Good question.

Doesn't AmFar feel just a little bit queasy about having to place the following disclaimer at the bottom of its full-page ad promoting the event: "Surgeon General's Warning — Smoking by pregnant women may result in fetal injury, premature birth and low-birth weight."?

And, how can it ignore studies like the one released Tuesday that demonstrate that, despite the tobacco purveyors' claims, advertising for Virginia Slims and other products does entice young people to take up smoking?

Philip Morris argues that it produces many more products, not just tobacco, but it neglects to tell us that the profits from all its food products don't equal a fraction of its profits from tobacco.

Purely and simply, this is blood money, folks, and the whole thing reeks of political hypocrisy on AmFar's part and pure greed on the part of the tennis pros.

It's not too late for AmFar to tell Philip Morris to take its money and shove it.