

OPINION/LETTERS



Who Should Gain From Your Medical Data?

Nov. 29, 2018

Messrs. Plecs and Cochrane claim (“Imagine What We Could Cure,” op-ed, Nov. 26) that the discovery of cigarettes as a cause of cancer came from “careful analysis of mounds of data.”

In fact, the large epidemiologic analyses of cigarette smoking and lung cancer in the late 1940s and early 1950s to which the authors doubtless refer only confirmed the discovery, which had been published by Alton Ochsner and Michael DeBakey in 1939. The two thoracic surgeons based their conclusion on having seen nine cases of lung cancer (until then an extremely rare disease) in a period of six months. Because all the patients were men who had taken up the newly mass-advertised practice of cigarette smoking as soldiers in World War I, Ochsner and DeBakey had the temerity to suggest that cigarettes were responsible.

The medical profession, the military, mass media, departments of health and legislatures alike all pooh-poohed this discovery, in large part due to the political and financial influence of the tobacco industry but also because most physicians (and indeed, two-thirds of all men) smoked cigarettes.

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