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HD:CARE FOR SOME DNA DAMAGE?

BY:Tony Lang

University of California medical scientists have found that teen-age smokers seem most vulnerable, of any age group, to permanent genetic damage. Even if they quit smoking, damage can be permanent and lead to cancer. The findings, reported in this week's Journal of the National Cancer Institute, may shock parents and jolt teens who think smoking is only a "temporary" bad habit. But don't count on the bad news driving flocks of adolescents to go cold turkey.

Teen fatalists may figure, "Why quit if I'm already doomed?" Or they may feel even more drawn to "forbidden fruit." Quitting does allow for some lung healing and almost immediate improvement in lung function. But the big news from the California study was scientists found less DNA repair, or less successful repair, in cancer patients who started smoking earlier in life. The highest cancer risk was found among those who started smoking between ages 9 and 12. Researchers think the still-growing lungs of young people may be most susceptible to permanent genetic changes.

The average smoker starts at 12.5 years old. In Ohio, it's 14. That's not a time of life renowned for sound judgment or attention to medical research. Smoking is increasing among U.S. females, blacks and college students (30 percent). Girls "sell" each other on smoking as "weight control." Florida claims it lowered student smoking rates with ads featuring "angry teens" furious at tobacco company lies.

But Dr. Alan Blum, founder of Doctors Ought to Care (DOC), thinks humor is still the best way to reach teens. Dr. Blum, who now lives in Houston, created some of the first spoof cigarette ads in the 1970s in Miami -- including bus-bench counter ads such as "Country Fresh Arsenic." He thinks tobacco settlement billions should not be sunk in top-heavy new anti-smoking bureaucracies but should go into frequent, simple messages spoofing the tobacco product. Like the fraud of cigarette filters that make people inhale twice as hard and smoke more. He also distrusts anti-smoking groups' drumbeat of needing billions to "save the kids," at a time when tobacco companies are shifting their marketing toward the post-18 crowd.

The proof of success will be in smoking rates -- for all age groups.