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Dr. Alan Blum has received a \$30,000 grant to help in his campaign against tobacco advertising and his efforts to educate youngsters about the dangers of smoking.

UA doctor receiving grant to help combat teen smoking

By Steve Reeves
Staff Writer

TUSCALOOSA | A University of Alabama doctor is receiving some help in his campaign against tobacco advertising and his efforts to educate youngsters about the perils of smoking.

The Alabama Department of Public Health last week gave a \$30,000 grant to the Rural Alabama Area Health Education Center and the Westside Community Action Council.

The money, which comes from the 1999, multi-billion settlement between leading tobacco companies and the state attorney general, will be used in developing curriculum at Westlawn Middle School and Walker Elementary School that educators hope will counteract what they call pervasive advertising by the tobacco industry that targets students.

"We want to make kids more resistant to the lures the tobacco companies are using," said Alan Blum, a doctor at UA's College of Community Health Services and director of the Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society. "We're going to see if we can immunize this next generation."

Blum, a nationally-recognized expert on tobacco-related health issues, is the founder of Doctors Ought to Care, a group that helps educate students about the dangers of tobacco use.

The grant is being used to set up a pilot program, the first of its kind in the state. Blum said the curriculum to be developed for the two Tuscaloosa schools will be geared toward making the students aware of how tobacco companies target youngsters.

The 2000 Alabama Youth Tobacco Survey reported that 37 percent of high school students and 27 percent of middle school students in the state are tobacco users. Nationwide, 35 percent of high school students and 13 percent of middle school students use tobacco.

"Just about every store you go to you can buy cigarettes and see tobacco advertising," Blum said. "That it's so ubiquitous is part of the problem. There are no counter messages anywhere."

Blum said the program will use humor as one way of making students question why tobacco products and advertising are so common, found even in many pharmacies.

"We want them to laugh at tobacco advertising," he said. "It's not just about going into schools and saying 'don't do this.' People have been doing that for years."

If the program at the Westlawn and Walker schools are successful, officials said they plan to expand the program to other area schools.

The Alabama Department of Public Health Grant is for one year of funding, but can be renewed for up to three years.