

EXPERT OPINION | DR. ALAN BLUM, director of the Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society



## Plan for FDA to police tobacco ignites criticism

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There's a growing movement in Washington to bring tobacco under the regulation of the Food and Drug Administration.

It is being advanced by a new, Democrat-controlled Congress and organizations like the American Cancer Society and American Medical As-

sociation. They all say a pending bill would rein in tobacco companies by controlling advertising and new products while monitoring existing products and strengthening warnings.

So it seems likely that such an effort would attract support from a long-time critic of the tobacco industry, Dr. Alan Blum, professor of family medicine and director of the Center

for the Study of Tobacco and Society at the University of Alabama.

Not so.

Blum has surfaced as one of the most vocal opponents of placing tobacco under FDA regulation. In February he testified before a Senate

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### Q&A: FDA tobacco plan draws criticism

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committee, and he continues to speak out against the measure. Here is his expert opinion:

**Q.** So why are you so opposed to bringing tobacco under FDA regulation?

**A.** I've never understood the reason for wanting to do this because I'm looking at the agency that's in charge of approving drugs for all of our health needs, to treat cancer and to treat heart disease. I don't know as though I'd also want to be putting a product that causes cancer and heart disease in the same agency.

**Q.** Wouldn't it help bring tobacco under control?

**A.** It's a counterintuitive argument I am making. For a change, people have got to look beyond the symbols and to the substance. There is no substance to this bill. It's all symbol.

The idea of this bill would not be to ban this product. It specifically states that cigarettes cannot be banned. The existing cigarettes are grandfathered in.

The goal is to reduce the nicotine level in cigarettes. That is one of the very specific goals of the bill. Well, that may not be good because when you get

lower nicotine cigarettes you're going to compensate and smoke more and thus get more of the harmful burned products of combustion that cigarettes have.

**Q.** What do the cigarette companies think of this?

**A.** This bill was crafted with the full cooperation and support of Philip Morris (maker of Marlboro). Nonetheless, this has not prevented the supporters of this bill in the health community from claiming they are fighting big tobacco.

That's just mind boggling that the Cancer Society, the Heart Association, the AMA and . . . the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids can get away with this.

**Q.** So why is it appealing to public health advocates and Philip Morris?

**A.** This will satisfy the fixation of what I call natural born regulators, people who don't like words such as light, ultra-light and low tar. And so there's no question about it, the FDA will, in its infinite wisdom, ban the terms light, ultra-light, low-tar and ultra-low-tar because those don't mean anything. All they do is create the false sense of safety on the part of consumers.

**Q.** So why does Philip Morris support the bill?

**A.** Another thing's going to happen with this bill. There are going to be restrictions on marketing. And the most aggressive marketer of cigarettes today is

R.J. Reynolds (maker of Winston, Doral, Camel and Kool cigarettes). They are trying very hard to compete with Marlboro.

Philip Morris knows that this bill, which is bound to limit cigarette advertising, is going to, in effect, freeze people's brands where they are.

**Q.** So you end up with people who want to make cigarettes safer allied with a company that wants to sell more cigarettes?

**A.** There's a presumption in something you just said — safe cigarettes. This is the dream of Philip Morris. The real overriding goal of this bill is to create the notion that there can be safer cigarettes. And this is what is so scandalous and so shocking, and in my opinion, obscene. There can no more be a safe cigarette than there can be turning lead into gold.

**Q.** What impact will this have on the FDA?

**A.** We do know that the head of the FDA, who is no slouch when it comes to smoking, Andrew von Eschenbach, is vehemently opposed to this bill. He thinks that it's absurd. You don't want to put your FDA commissioner in the position of regulating the single most lethal consumer product there is.

How can we put this product in the hands of an agency that can't even manage diabetic drugs and a host of other snafus?

I think it could be the greatest

thing ever for pharmaceutical companies. The minute this bill passes, from day one, there's not a drug company that can't say, 'Hey, you've got to be crazy. You're regulating cigarettes, which kill a half million people a year, and you yell at my drug for causing three adverse effects out of 800,000 people.'

**Q.** So you think this will lower the bar on pharmaceutical safety?

**A.** I think this will eliminate the bar. When you take the FDA and pollute it by putting cigarettes in there, I think everybody loses.

**Q.** If not this, what should the country do about tobacco?

**A.** I just think it's a bad bill. People are fixated on this.

It's not like they can't go to another agency. It's not like they can't go to the Federal Trade Commission, which already regulates cigarette advertising.

Doesn't the CDC talk about every epidemic in the world? Why not give them full charge of it?

People don't see that this could actually make the situation worse. It's like we're going to regulate them, but on terms that are really favorable to the tobacco companies.

That's the way we are in our society. We get fixated in a given week, a given month, or whatever, whether it's global warming or nicotine. I think that's what's happened here.

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