

Heat on hospital over fund-raiser — sponsors hit Brewery, tobacco firm back event

By D.J. Wilson

POST MEDICAL REPORTER

A Houston hospital's role in a fund raiser billed as a "bone-breaking" event sponsored by a brewery and a tobacco company has drawn criticism from some local health authorities.

University Children's Hospital at Hermann will benefit by Saturday's "Super-cross" motorcycle racing event, sponsored by Camel cigarettes and Coors beer. How much the hospital receives will depend on attendance, Hermann spokeswoman Christine LeLaurin said.

LeLaurin emphasized that Hermann agreed to be the beneficiary of the "motocross" motorcycle event in the Astrodome without knowing about any involvement by the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., the makers of Camel.

Advertisements have been changed to clarify that the pediatric hospital is not a sponsor, but will benefit from part of the proceeds.

The television commercial aired this weekend promises the event will feature "bone-breaking, fender-bending, high-flying, mega-voltage AMA sanctioned," action. The AMA reference is to the American Motorcycle Association, not the American Medical Association.

Dr. Alan Blum of Houston, founder of the national anti-smoking group Doctors Ought to Care, said the tobacco and alcohol companies' involvement is their attempt to reach the adolescent market. Cheaper tickets are available for children.

Whatever funds are raised, Blum said, the credibility given to the tobacco and alcohol companies by their association with a pediatric hospital makes the hospital's decision to participate a mistake.

The advertisement — with its use of the Camel cigarette logo — was a further surprise to Blum.

"I was incredulous. I thought it was a joke, a satire on all these motocross events. It sounded like someone doing a spoof, like

on Saturday Night Live," said Blum.

A Coors spokesman said the brewery often participates in charity fund-raising events, and for sporting events tries to be sure that most of the audience is of legal drinking age.

Representatives from the R.J. Reynolds Co. did not return phone calls from The Houston Post.

Dr. Don Fernbach, head of hematology-oncology at Baylor College of Medicine, said the hospital's affiliation with the event is "extremely distasteful."

Since cigarette smoking is "habituating and addictive," Fernbach said. The company's goal is to recruit new smokers, since it will be hard to stop once they begin.

The executive director of the American Lung Association/San Jacinto Area, Spencer Yantis, stopped short of directly blaming Hermann for its involvement but said the lung association is careful not to enlist "sponsorships that would compromise or conflict with our well-established stand against tobacco use and promotion."

Yantis said tobacco marketing people know that 90 percent of smokers started as teen-agers.

"Not surprisingly, tobacco companies insist their marketing is not aimed at children and teen-agers. But you can bet they'll be out at the motocross selling t-shirts and caps with that silly cartoon Camel on them," Yantis said.

The motorcycle race Saturday is expected to draw a crowd of about 35,000, said Ethan Cartwright, director of marketing for the Houston Sports Association. The race course is a recreation of an outdoor motocross course, complete with 20-foot hills, hairpin turns and "whoop-de-doo," a series of bumps.

Such motorcycle racing can indeed be bone breaking, and is part of the reason Dr. Jeffrey Reuben, assistant professor of orthopedic surgery at the University of Texas Medical School at Houston, "thought it strange the University hospital was sponsoring this type of event."