

Melanoma

Research Alliance

Bronze Bodies and Black Lungs: Five Analogies that Reveal How the Tanning and Tobacco Industries are the Same

By: Charles A. Brodine

As indoor tanners pull their booth covers across their bodies, they simultaneously increase their risk of developing melanoma by as much as 75%. “Use a tanning bed once, and all bets are off,” says Dr. Alan Blum.

Tanning has become a popular fad among young people—college-age women in particular—and adults alike, helping to fuel increasing rates of melanoma, the most life-threatening skin cancer and the second most common cancer in women aged 15-29 after lymphoma. Overall, tanning is believed to be the cause of 400,000 of the 4 million cases each year of all types of skin cancer, according to the [American Academy of Dermatology \(AAD\)](#).

Dr. Alan Blum, the Gerald Leon Wallace Endowed Chair in Family Medicine at University of Alabama’s College of Community Health Sciences and Director of The Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society, has chronicled the influence of the tobacco industry and fought against its grip on society. Blum is a natural ally to our nation’s skin cancer prevention efforts because according to him, both industries exploit people in similar ways, by targeting youth, downplaying their own corporate responsibility, infiltrating pop-culture, and indeed, by becoming prolific icons.

“The tobacco industry became the punching bag of the 1990’s. I don’t want the tanning salon industry to be the next punching bag—I want to see them out of business,” says Blum.

Five Ways the Tobacco and Indoor Tanning Industries Are Alike

Both Industries Put Profit Ahead of People

Let’s start with the basics: tanning salons and cigarette manufacturers are big businesses motivated by making money. This means that hooking young people on their product is critical for their survival. “Health is such an abstract thing, we don’t realize it until we lose it,” says Blum. “These industries know this, and exploit this.”

Both Industries Sell ‘Class 1 Killers’

Without a doubt tobacco and tanning beds cause cancer. In fact, both have been designated as [Group 1 Carcinogens](#) by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). Other Group 1 carcinogens include formaldehyde, arsenic, and asbestos.

Both Industries ‘Hide Behind the Label’

Once tanning bed and tobacco manufacturers lure you in, they put the onus of health on *YOU*. They side-step blame by slapping obscure warning labels on their products, and then confidently announce that “Users make their own decisions, they’ve seen the warning labels, there’s nothing we can do,” says Blum. Meanwhile, the warning about cancer on the front of the cigarette pack or on the backside of a tanning bed has done little to discourage cigarette consumption or the use of tanning beds.

FACT: For most of the 20th century, ultra violet radiation-emitting “sun lamps” by General Electric and other manufacturers were advertised in medical journals as a way to get healthy doses of vitamin D during winter months. The first full-body immersion tanning beds were manufactured in 1978. In 2014, the Food and Drug Administration ordered tanning salons to include warning labels on their products. In spite of these warnings, which were meant to discourage minors from tanning, [nearly a third of users of tanning beds reported](#) tanning before turning 18, according to the AAD.

Both Industries ‘Blame the Victim’

No one deserves cancer, yet “People who get lung cancer get less sympathy than other patients because they are blamed for having smoked,” says Blum. Cancer-shaming is a way to deflect all responsibility for misleading health claims and to place the onus of health on the patient, as cigarette manufacturers do.

FACT: As if cancer wasn’t enough to cope with, melanoma and lung cancer patients may also need to combat [depression as a result of being stigmatized](#). Defining an individual by their disease—be it cancer, mental illness, or obesity—is dehumanizing, reductive, and divisive. [Here are some ways you can be supportive in the right way to your colleagues, friends and family.](#)

Both Industries Perpetuate ‘Moderation Myths’

A little poison is still poison, but both industries perpetuate the myth of safety in moderation.

In 1954, tobacco manufactures broadly introduced the paradoxical concept of “the safe cigarette.” In reality, the filters found in about 98% of cigarettes today don’t filter anything. They are fraudulent. “The filter actually makes cigarette smoking more dangerous because people have to suck harder, and thus they get exposed to far more poison gases like carbon monoxide, cyanide, and formaldehyde gases at far greater velocity,” says Blum. There is no safe cigarette.

Just as there is no safe cigarette, there is no safe tan. Indoor tanning is as dangerous (if not more dangerous) than outdoor tanning because [tanning beds emit up to 12 times more UVA radiation](#) than the sun. Furthermore, base tans—a contrived means of building up a tolerance to intense tanning sessions by gradually exposing one’s skin to UV rays—are evidence of already damaged skin cells. Contrary to popular belief, [base tans are not safe](#), and they do not act as sun-shields; they offer a measly sun-protection factor (SPF) of three. For reference, one needs to [apply sunscreen with ten-times as much SPF every two hours](#) to be sun-safe outdoors. (For that matter, sunscreens may not offer as much protection from skin cancer as their manufacturers claim.)

Both industries perpetuate ‘moderation myths’ to encourage complacency among users, explains Blum. The decision to light up or lie down becomes all the easier if terms like “safer smoking” or “safe tanning” cover up the death and disease caused by cigarettes. There is no one-time-cost for tanning and smoking; damage is immediate and compounded with each subsequent use.

The Next 50 years...

According to Blum, battling melanoma is as much a fight against the tanning bed industry as it is a fight against lung cancer and the tobacco industry. The ultimate goal is to provide the public with expansive health education, revealing how the upsides of tanning and smoking—which are mainly the profits to the manufacturers—“are more than outweighed by the deaths, disease, and high medical costs these products can cause,” says Blum. “We must show each industry’s *modus operandi*, which is to hook young people to their product.”

In 1964, the US [Surgeon General’s report on smoking](#) and health was released, establishing a definitive link to tobacco use and diseases like lung cancer. Today, 38-50 million people are still smoking, “and that’s 55 years after we knew proof positive what smoking did to you,” says Blum. The Surgeon General released [his Call to Action to Prevent Skin Cancer](#) just five years ago. If we don’t knock out the tanning industry, “are we going to be here 50 years from now saying, ‘gee are we ever really going to prevent melanoma,’” asks Blum.