

Exhibition, Film about Landmark Report on Smoking and Health Pose Provocative Question

“The Surgeon General vs. The Marlboro Man: Who Really Won?” That’s the provocative question posed by an original exhibition at Gorgas Library of The University of Alabama to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the publication of the landmark 1964 U.S. Surgeon General’s Report on Smoking and Health.

Through more than 130 artifacts, from packages of candy cigarettes that look like real ones to copies of medical journals with physicians endorsing various cigarette brands, the exhibition traces the promotion of smoking in America throughout the past century. Highlighting the exhibition is a copy of the Surgeon General’s report, as well as headlines from the front pages of six newspapers the day the report was released.

Alan Blum, MD, the Gerald Leon Wallace MD Endowed Chair in Family Medicine at the University’s College of Community Health Sciences, curated the exhibition, which will be shown at the Gorgas Library through December 1. One of the nation’s foremost authorities on the tobacco industry and the anti-smoking movement, Blum serves as director of the University’s Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society, which he founded in 1998.

In addition, on November 20, a reception will be held in conjunction with the exhibition to honor the memory of Luther Terry, MD, an Alabamian who was the country’s Surgeon General when the 1964 report was released.

Honored guests at the reception will include: Celia Wallace, chair of the Mobile, Ala.-based Springhill Hospital board of directors and wife of the late Dr. Gerald Wallace; Terry’s son, Michael Terry, a Memphis, Tenn. businessman; Robert Robinson, PhD, former associate director of the Office on Smoking and Health at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; and Donald Shopland, a staff member to the advisory committee that wrote the 1964 report on smoking and health.

The reception will feature the premier screening of the short documentary, “Blowing Smoke: The Lost Legacy of the Surgeon General’s Report,” by Blum, his son Samuel Blum and University of Alabama alumnus Jake Buettner. “The 50th anniversary of the report is not a celebration, but rather a sobering reminder of missed opportunities to curb the nation’s number one avoidable cause of cancer, heart disease, emphysema and high health care costs,” Alan Blum says.

Following the film, an open discussion to consider future efforts to counter smoking and its promotion will include remarks from Richard Streiffer, MD, dean of the University’s College of Community Health Sciences; Rebecca Kelly, PhD, director of the University’s Office of Health Promotion and Wellness; Fayette Royal, a tri-county tobacco control officer for the Alabama Department of Public Health; and Zac McMillian, a University of Alabama pre-medical student working for a smoke-free campus.

The exhibition, reception and film premier, together titled “Exhibition, Film Commemorate Landmark Surgeon General’s Report on Smoking,” will be held from 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm in the Amelia Gayle Gorgas Library Pearce Foyer and adjacent Room 205 (second floor).

From the 1920s through the 1960s, actors, actresses and athletes were models in cigarette advertisements. Baseball greats Joe Dimaggio and Lou Gherig were quoted in the ads in the Sunday newspaper comic pages saying, “Camels don’t get my wind,” and “I can smoke as many as I please.” Even Jackie Robinson promoted Chesterfield, “The baseball man’s cigarette.”

Blum says for most of the 20th century, the tobacco industry claimed that reports of smoking and disease had been based on statistical associations and not biological and pathological evidence; meanwhile, the industry’s own researchers were acknowledging that smoking caused cancer.

On January 11, 1964, at a packed press conference in the U.S. State Department in Washington, D.C., Surgeon General Luther Terry released what would become one of the most important documents in the history of medicine. The report was the culmination of a year-long analysis of the world’s literature on smoking by a 10-member scientific advisory committee that also included Charles LeMaistre, MD, a distinguished alumnus of The University of Alabama. The committee’s conclusions: “Cigarette smoking is causally related to lung cancer in men...and is a health hazard of sufficient importance to warrant appropriate remedial action.”

“Yet, even after the Surgeon General’s Report was published, cigarette manufacturers continued to deny the evidence and sought to allay public anxiety by assuring that new filtered, low-tar, light and ultra-light brands were not harmful,” Blum says.

The exhibition illustrates how cigarette maker Philip Morris ingeniously associated smoking with the women’s liberation movement beginning in the late 1960s with the launch of its Virginia Slims brand, along with TV and the print advertising containing the slogan, “You’ve come a long way, Baby.” For nearly 25 years, telecasts of the Virginia Slims Women’s Tennis Circuit circumvented the 1971 Congressional ban on cigarette advertising on television. By 1985, lung cancer had surpassed breast cancer deaths among U.S. women, while women’s magazines continued to accept cigarette advertising. “One part of the exhibition highlights the way in which magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Ebony*, *Rolling Stone*, *Ms.*, and others played down the risks of smoking—even in stories about cancer and heart disease—so as not to displease their cigarette advertisers,” Blum says.

The exhibition concludes with the reminder that “Fifty years after the Surgeon General’s landmark report, the health and economic toll taken by smoking remains devastating.”

“Surgeon General Terry’s indictment of cigarettes in 1964 might have been expected to mark the beginning of the end of the Marlboro man,” Blum says. “But far from riding off into the sunset, the tobacco industry is riding high in the saddle, while maintaining the nicotine addiction of nearly 50 million Americans. The tragic result is that cigarette smoking is still the nation’s number one avoidable health problem, accounting for 440,000 deaths a year, including 7,600 in Alabama—more

than the annual deaths from AIDS, illegal drugs, alcohol, motor vehicle accidents, homicides, and suicides combined.”

The Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society at The University of Alabama holds Blum’s vast ethnographic collection of more than 100,000 original items related to tobacco—including more than 3,000 books and pamphlets, several thousand cigarette ads and promotional items, 1,300 editorial cartoons, thousands of original photographs and memorabilia from tobacco-sponsored sports and cultural events, and 2,000 videotapes, DVDs and audio recordings of tobacco-related news stories, cigarette commercials and documentaries.

In 1977, Blum founded Doctors Ought to Care (DOC), the first physicians’ organization dedicated to ending the tobacco pandemic. As editor of the *Medical Journal of Australia* and the *New York State Journal of Medicine* in the 1980s, he published the first theme issues on tobacco of any journal. He was awarded the Surgeon General’s Medallion by former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop, and in 2006 received an honorary doctor of science from Amherst College for his efforts to end the tobacco pandemic.

The current exhibition is Blum’s tenth on tobacco-related subjects since 1988. “Cartoonists Take Up Smoking,” which looked at the battles over smoking during the last 50 years as seen through the eyes of the nation’s editorial cartoonists, was on view at the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington, D.C., as well as at 12 other venues in the United States. “Up in Smoke,” the history of the airline flight attendants’ struggle to end smoking on airlines, was hosted by the Louis A. Turpen Museum of Aviation at the San Francisco International Airport and two other airports.

Accompanying the current exhibition at Gorgas Library are three banners with a timeline of the history of tobacco. The banners were co-curated by Blum with the Texas Medical Association in 2010 for an exhibition, “Smoke and Mirrors,” at the TMA’s medical museum.

After December 1, a version of the exhibition currently at The University of Alabama will travel to the Lyndon Baines Presidential Library in Austin and the Texas Medical Center Library in Houston.

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