

Exhibition, Film about the Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health

At Texas Medical Center Library Raise Provocative Questions

Why did the American Medical Association (AMA) drag its feet in endorsing the findings in the 1964 U.S. Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health? That's one of the provocative questions posed by a new exhibition at the Texas Medical Center (TMC) Library to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the publication of the landmark report. The exhibit and related educational events are being co-sponsored by the TMC Library and UTHealth.

Through more than 40 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 major newspapers when the report was released.

Alan Blum, MD, the Gerald Leon Wallace MD Endowed Chair in Family Medicine at the University of Alabama College of Community Health Sciences, curated the exhibition, which will be shown at the TMC Library through April 1 (a parallel exhibit is also on display at the LBJ Presidential Library in Austin through June 30). One of the nation's foremost authorities on the tobacco industry and the anti-smoking movement, Blum serves as director of the University of Alabama's Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society. Blum was an associate professor of family medicine at Baylor College of Medicine from 1987-1999 and was the founder and chairman of DOC (Doctors Ought to Care), the first physicians' organization dedicated to ending the tobacco pandemic.

"The fact that the AMA initially refused to accept the findings from the 1964 Surgeon General's Report was just one of many examples in the ensuing decades where the medical and public health communities failed to do the right thing," stated Blum. "Within days of the release of the report by the Surgeon General in 1964, the AMA announced a program calling for 'more research' to study the effects of smoking – a program that was funded by six tobacco companies, providing more than \$15 million to the AMA over 14 years."

On Thursday March 6 at 4 p.m. on the first floor of the TMC Library, Dr. Blum will share stories that chronicle what he calls "the fear, foot-dragging and complacency on the part of public health agencies, universities and organized medicine alike in ending the tobacco pandemic." A reception will follow, and the event is free and open to the public.

The exhibit also features a short documentary. "Blowing Smoke: The Lost Legacy of the Surgeon General's Report," produced by Dr. Blum. "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 costs," Blum says.

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 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.

“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.

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, who would later become the President of M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. 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, which also includes an M.D. Anderson ashtray from the 1950s, 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 deaths had surpassed breast cancer deaths among U.S. women, while women’s magazines continued to accept cigarette advertising, as many still do today. “Yet well into the 1990’s the Virginia Slims Tennis Tournament in Houston would garner the support of local hospitals and their chief executives under the guise of a fundraiser to benefit amfAR, the Foundation for AIDS Research,” said Blum.

“That nearly all government funding allocated to fighting smoking is spent on research that adds very little to what we have known since 1964 is disgraceful,” Blum added. “It suggests that the most addictive thing about tobacco is money.”

“Surgeon General Terry’s indictment of cigarettes in 1964 should have marked 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—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 archive 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.