

Universities have no business holding tobacco stocks

BY ALAN BLUM
SPECIAL TO THE HOUSTON POST

Few people in this country, apart from those involved in the tobacco industry, the uneducated or the willfully ignorant, still dispute the findings of the surgeon general and every major medical group that tobacco use is the most preventable cause of death, disease and disability in the United States.

Each year more Americans die from diseases caused by smoking than from AIDS, pneumonia, tuberculosis, homicide, suicide, alcohol and illegal drugs combined. Worldwide, preventable deaths attributed to tobacco are estimated at 2.5 million a year; the number is expected to rise to 4 million by the turn of the century.

The surgeon general's report on smoking was released early in 1964, and cigarette ads on radio and TV were banned six years later. In 1981, a group of young physicians that I coordinated finally succeeded in persuading the American Medical Association to eliminate several million dollars worth of tobacco stocks from its retirement fund. In 1984, we focused on university-based medical schools in Illinois. The resulting publicity led a few institutions, such as the University of Illinois, to sell their tobacco stock, but others, such as Loyola, refused to do so.

Until this past June, when Harvard University and the City University of New York separately announced that they would divest millions of dollars in tobacco stock holdings, little more was said or done in the academic community about the ethics of profiting from the sale of tobacco.

This heightened focus on the ethics of profiting from the sale of tobacco has led people on and off the campuses to realize that the issue is not a battle between those who smoke and those who do not, but rather one that pits the tobacco industry against those who promote good health.

Encouraged by the Boston-based Tobacco Divestment Project, students, faculty and alumni at other universities have formed organizations that are urging their institutions to dump cigarette stocks.

In a speech delivered at the University of Texas on Oct. 5, former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop strongly endorsed the efforts of a newly formed group, Students Against Tobacco Investments. Koop noted the contradiction of a "great university with a world-renowned reputation for the treatment of cancer at your M.D. Anderson Hospital, where 10,000 people are there each year because they smoked, and at the same time



"ACTUALLY, WE'VE ISOLATED A MAJOR CAUSE OF CANCER, BUT THERE'S NOTHING MODERN SCIENCE CAN DO ABOUT IT..."

this university has an investment of almost \$50 million in tobacco."

Thus far the chairman of the UT Board of Regents, Louis A. Beccherl, Jr., has defended the traditional policy of maximizing the return on endowment funds.

At Rice University, which holds more tobacco stocks (\$33 million) than any other private educational institution in the United States, 30 members of a group called Rice Alumni for Tobacco Divestment last week sent a letter to university president George Rupp urging Rice to follow the lead of Harvard and CUNY in selling off tobacco stocks. The group is coordinated by Rice alumnus Phil Huang, M.D., who led the Harvard divestment effort.

The issue of tobacco companies' support of university-based research may be an even hotter potato — but ultimately more meaningful — than divestment, because a refusal to accept such support would emphasize not only the immorality of profiting from tobacco sales, but also the intellectual dishonesty of the tobacco industry in its purposeful misuse and distortion of research.

The industry uses selected findings from research it pays for in advertisements, legal and legislative testimony and publicity campaigns by the Tobacco Institute, its public relations arm. The institute promotes the views of industry-supported researchers, thus fostering the notion that there exists a serious scientific dispute about the risks of smoking. It plays down re-

search that has found smoking to cause illness while publicizing findings on the role of other factors, such as stress, eating habits or air pollution.

An example of how the tobacco industry tries to sabotage science came to light in October when the Associated Press revealed last-ditch efforts by Philip Morris to place tobacco industry-financed researchers on an Environmental Protection Agency panel that was convened to consider an EPA proposal to classify secondhand tobacco smoke as a cause of lung cancer in people who do not smoke.

While the makers of alcoholic beverages, pesticides and a host of other harmful substances now acknowledge the risks of exposure to their products, tobacco companies refuse to do so. In public-health circles, a new definition of "infinity" has been coined: the number of studies it would take for a tobacco company to acknowledge that smoking can cause even a cough or that cigarette advertising helps lead children to smoke.

Although more than 1.5 million Americans stop smoking every year (through quitting or dying), more than 1.25 million take it up, virtually all of them adolescents. Ethnic minority groups, especially young blacks and Hispanics, show far higher smoking rates than the general population. Cigarettes are the most-advertised product in youth-oriented magazines.

A major obstacle to tackling the tobacco pandemic is complacency

— a belief that the "war" on smoking has been won — on the part of the public, health professionals and the academic community. Indeed, many people in academic feel that criticism should be tempered, because tobacco companies are diversifying into other products and services. Smoking will die out over the next few years, their reasoning goes, and diversification will allow the companies to replace lost revenue.

Such thinking is misguided. Although cigarette sales in the United States have leveled off over the past decade, the average decline in per-capita cigarette consumption has been less than 1 percent a year, and the companies' profits have risen to record levels. The proportion of total profit accounted for by tobacco sales is still by far the high-

est of all sources of revenue for the diversified companies.

My efforts to raise the alarm about the tobacco industry have often been treated with greater seriousness by company spokesmen than by my medical colleagues. Most doctors and researchers do not pretend to be activists — they are looking for cures, not crusades.

For a university in 1990 to continue to hold a stake in a tobacco company shows contempt for the very knowledge that has been gained by university researchers about tobacco during the past 50 years.

The only defensible purpose is holding tobacco stock is to use it to vote to end the companies' cynical promotion of tobacco to new markets. A better course would be to divest and join in ringing down the curtain on the industry before it can hook another generation.

Blum, an M.D., is assistant professor of family medicine at Baylor College of Medicine and former editor of the Medical Journal of Australia. In 1977 he founded the health-advocacy group, Doctors Ought to Care, that has pushed for divestment of tobacco stocks.

NOTICE

The FIBERGLASS BASKETBALL BACKBOARD advertised in Today's Target Circular incorrectly states that a pole is included. Instead, THE BACKBOARD includes a net and goal. We apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.

The MICKEY MOUSE JOG SETS advertised in Today's Target Circular were described as being made of polyester-cotton. Some styles are made of this blend, however, several are made of 100% acrylic or polyester-acrylic.

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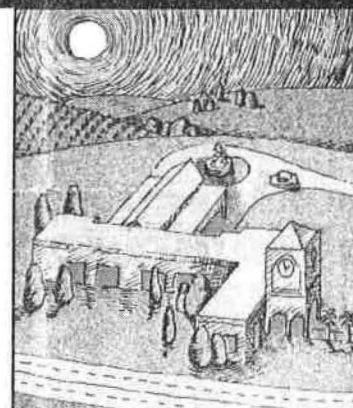
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