

Big tobacco has surprising friends

At the 16th World Conference on Tobacco or Health in Abu Dhabi last week, the latest grim statistics shocked even veteran anti-smoking advocates.

In spite of the growing number of nations that have banned smoking in public places and have prohibited or restricted cigarette advertising and marketing, the annual death toll from cigarette smoking keeps rising. A mind-boggling 6.2 million people will die in 2015 from the ravages of smoking, including more than 480,000 in the U.S., where the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in five deaths in the U.S. — and fully a third of all deaths from cancer — is caused by cigarette smoking.

Over the 50 years since the publication of the landmark Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health, the percentage of adults who smoke has been cut in half in the U.S. to less than 20 percent. But the actual number of smokers is almost the same, and the decline in smoking in the crucial 18 to 34-year-old age group — the lifeblood of Big Tobacco — has stalled. Ominously, too, smoking is on the rise in many countries.

The assumption of the more than 2000 public health professionals from over 100 countries at the conference is that the tobacco industry is the villain, wielding enormous economic and political clout.

But it's not just the cigarette companies who benefit from smoking. Without its business allies, the tobacco industry couldn't exist. These include retailers such as the major chain supermarkets, drugstores, and convenience stores. Then there are the suppliers of packaging, chemicals, paper and the very machines used to manufacture cigarettes.

Take Siemens, a global engineering and electronics corporation that cultivates an image of a



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health-care company in advertisements in major magazines and newspapers, and that runs a science competition for high school students. Chances are that anyone undergoing diagnostic testing for cancer will have blood analyzed — or one's entire body scanned — in a machine made by Siemens.

But Siemens also has a division unknown to the health community and the public — its “tobacco segment,” which provides technical know-how for the largest international cigarette makers such as Philip Morris, RJ Reynolds and British American Tobacco. Siemens boasts on its website of helping them produce hundreds of billions of cigarettes each year throughout the world. One Siemens machine operates “at speeds of 4,000 to 20,000 cigarettes per minute.”

So it was dismaying to see in advertisements for Public Broadcasting Service's new film “Cancer: The Emperor of All Maladies” (to air on PBS stations over three nights March 30-April 1) that one of its major sponsors is Siemens. During the six-hour documentary, a single Siemens machine will produce 7,800,000 cigarettes.

Siemens also helps fund the national telethon Stand Up To Cancer, which happens to be the lead sponsor of the PBS film. Stand Up To Cancer also partners with several companies that either sell, promote, or otherwise derive income from the sale of cigarettes, including Safeway Stores' foundation, the Steve Tisch Foundation (with funding derived in part from family-owned Lorillard Tobacco, maker of Newport) and the publishers Conde Nast and Time Inc.,

which continue to advertise cigarettes in their magazines.

When asked about these cigarette-related sponsors of their film about cancer, director Barak Goodman and producer Ken Burns declined to comment. Their public relations spokesman explained that they “were not involved in the funding selection for this film and cannot speak to your inquiry.”

The Washington, D.C., public television station WETA, which solicited the money for the film, explained that “for the project ‘Cancer: The Emperor of All Maladies,’ funding was provided by an unprecedented number of public and private entities, non-profits and corporations, including Siemens. And, of course, funders had no editorial input whatsoever.”

WETA said that in presenting the film, it wants to start a national dialogue on cancer. That conversation ought to have begun with a commitment on its part to decline funding from companies and organizations that benefit from the manufacture, sale or promotion of the leading preventable cause of cancer, cigarettes.

But why not take the money from Siemens? For that matter, why not hit up the cigarette companies for cash, too? Surely nobody wants a cure for cancer more than they do. After all, they lose more of their best customers to this disease than does any other business. And if there were a magical miracle cure for lung cancer, then their customers could continue smoking to their heart's content. Well, perhaps not. Cigarette smoking is also the leading preventable cause of heart disease.

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