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Let's prevent a smoking generation

By ALAN BLUM

To observe the 1980 World Health Day theme of "Smoking or Health -- The Choice is Yours," 24 countries issued an anti-smoking postage stamp.

Since then, 41 other countries have recognized the importance of tackling the tobacco pandemic by issuing such stamps.

The United States is not among those 65 countries with an anti-smoking stamp.

Dr. W. Jeff Terry, president-elect of the Medical Association of the State of Alabama, wants the medical profession and the public alike to correct this glaring oversight. Last month, the American Medical Association approved his resolution that calls on physicians to campaign for a stamp to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the publication of the Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health.

In the two decades following the report, more than 20 million Americans kicked the habit, resulting in a significant decline in heart attacks and a slow but steady decrease in lung cancer in men.

The Alabama connection is important, because the individual most responsible for the report was Dr. Luther Terry (1911-1985), a native son of Red Level and a graduate of Birmingham-Southern College (and cousin of Jeff Terry).

In 2002, Luther Terry was inducted posthumously into the Alabama Healthcare Hall of Fame for his contributions as surgeon general of the United States Public Health Service, the nation's physician in chief, from 1961 to 1965.

The report was the culmination of growing scientific concerns about cigarette smoking over four decades. By 1940, one of the most outspoken opponents of smoking, Dr. Alton Ochsner of Tulane University, would publish his observations on the association between cigarettes and lung cancer, citing more than 400 reports in medical journals. In 1961, the presidents of several health groups, including the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association, urged President John F. Kennedy to establish a commission to study the mounting evidence of the adverse health effects of smoking.

Terry was charged with producing an expert scientific review of the subject. (Among the 10 eminent biomedical scientists asked to form the committee to write the report was Dr. Mickey LeMaistre, a distinguished alumnus of the University of Alabama.) Meeting in secret for 14 months from November 1962 at the National Library of Medicine (named after U.S. Sen. Lister Hill of Alabama), the committee reviewed more than 7,000 scientific articles on smoking, as well as information provided by the tobacco industry.

The 387-page report, issued on Jan. 11, 1964, at a packed press conference, hit the country like a bombshell, making front-page headlines in virtually every newspaper in the country. Writing in the *New York State Journal of Medicine* in 1983, Terry recalled, "The report not only carried a strong condemnation of tobacco usage, especially cigarette smoking, but conveyed its message in such clear and concise language that it could not be misunderstood."

There was no minority report. Terry was exceptionally proud of the fact that of the "more than 30,000 articles published in the 20 years since the report, almost without exception they confirm the committee's findings and extend the knowledge of the health hazards of smoking."

Terry spent the rest of his life as a spokesperson for the anti-smoking movement and fought hard to eliminate smoking from the workplace.

It is fitting to recall Terry's appeal to physicians in 1983 not to be complacent about fighting cigarette smoking -- or the tobacco industry: "The abuses of the cigarette

companies are too numerous to mention. It is clear that they do not want the public to recognize the health hazards and the enormous financial cost to society caused by smoking. Therefore, health professionals must take back the leadership role.

"I hope that every member of the medical profession will recognize this responsibility and will be committed to spreading the message that tobacco smoking is the single most preventable cause of disability and death in the United States."

Nearly half a century after the surgeon general's report, cigarettes still kill more Americans than AIDS, breast cancer, sickle cell disease, motor vehicle accidents, alcohol, illegal drugs, homicides, suicides and fires combined. A stamp commemorating Terry's monumental report will be an important symbol to remind us all to help protect the next generation from the needless suffering caused by cigarette smoking.

Alan Blum, M.D., directs the University of Alabama Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society. An exhibition of the center's collection of the world's anti-smoking postage stamps will be on view at the Alabama Museum of the Health Sciences from Monday through Sept. 15. To support a stamp commemorating Dr. Luther Terry's release of the Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health, write to the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee c/o Stamp Development, U.S. Postal Service, 1735 N. Lynn St., Suite 5013, Arlington, VA 22209-6432.