

ALABAMA ALUMNI

MAGAZINE

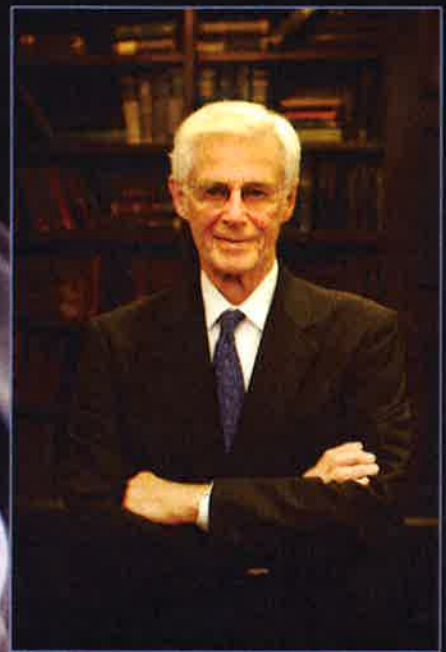
A Healing Touch

- Curative Measures
- Battling the Statistics
- Supreme Coverage

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When the Smoke Clears

by Caroline Gwaltney



It was old Hollywood that made them glamorous. Cigarettes were portrayed as stylish accessories to accent the highest fashion, as beautiful women populated the backs of magazines in large advertisements, inviting everyone to try the greatest thing on Earth.

And they were everywhere, from Audrey Hepburn's iconic cigarette holder in the 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to the rugged Marlboro Man and cool Joe Camel who plastered billboards from coast to coast. They promised sophistication, sex appeal and even longevity itself.

By 1964, 78 percent of adults in America were smoking. But even after the advertisements went away and smoking bans were put in place, many continued to use the single most addictive substance of our time. Fast-forward to the year 2007, and millions of people are still addicted. Sure, the numbers have dropped, but there is an overwhelming concern among doctors that the statistics have plateaued and will continue to remain the same unless something drastic is done.

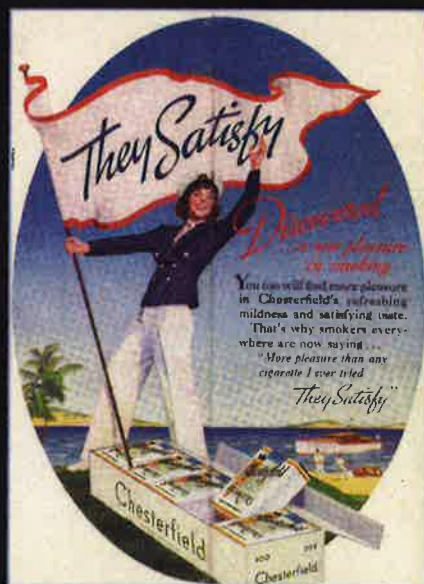
Dr. Charles "Mickey" LeMaistre, a 1944 University of Alabama graduate and one of the two surviving authors of the Surgeon General's Report of 1964 that confirmed smoking as a cause of lung cancer, says cigarettes as we know them today became popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s as companies began mass producing them. In World War I and II, cigarettes were distributed among the soldiers, according to LeMaistre, and from then on their popularity grew, until a large number of the nation's population was hooked.

While the use of tobacco has a long and checkered history, evidently having been part of human culture since prehistoric days, the tobacco plant is believed to have spread through America in the first century. And although the milestone Surgeon General's Report confirmed the inherent danger, even so it has been a long, uphill battle to change the smoking habits of Americans and set a precedent for how to handle public health threats.

LeMaistre, who was born in Lockhart, Ala., received his medical degree from Cornell in 1947 and served 18 years as president of the University of Texas' M.S. Anderson Cancer Center. He has spent the past two years researching the events that led to the formation of the committee that developed the report, and the aftermath of the project.

Levels of tobacco use show that the official caution did indeed dramatically alter the smoking habits

This page: cigarette advertisements regularly ran on the back cover of the Alabama Alumni News in the 1930s. Opposite page: Dr. Mickey LeMaistre



Us Tareyton smokers would rather fight than switch!

1973



1989



2000



of Americans after it was published. Since 1964, smoking in the United States has declined 58 percent, but that decrease has leveled off in recent years. And despite the decline of the last few decades, the rate at which young people are taking their first drag is the same as before. "The solution is to find a way to break the nicotine habit completely and raise a generation of non-smokers," LeMaistre said. "If you do that, you eliminate one third of all cancer, 90 percent of lung cancer, 90 percent of emphysema and 25 percent of heart disease."

Dr. Alan Blum, professor of family medicine and the director of UA's Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society, agreed, noting that there were 50 million smokers in 1964, and there are 50 million smokers in 2007—still a decreased percentage, compared to the growth in population. But a disturbing trend is that we now have the youngest group of smokers ever. "That's how the tobacco companies have adapted to change," he said. "Older people got smarter, but younger people continue

to think they are invulnerable."

As for lung cancer, both LeMaistre and Blum feel the rates are not going down fast enough. Blum said we have the same survival rate as we had 30 to 40 years ago, although the lung cancer rate in men has begun to fall. Lung cancer in women is at an all-time high since women in general began smoking later than men, and lung cancer has actually surpassed breast cancer as the number one cancer killer of women, he said.

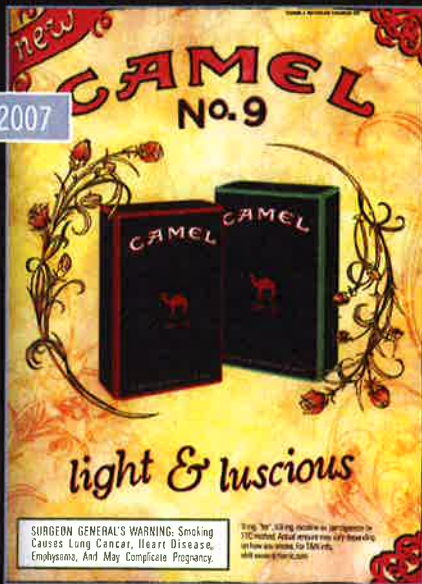
LeMaistre and Blum concur that one of the greatest advances in the smoking battle has been the passage of clean indoor air laws in recent years, utilizing the environmental approach to target secondhand smoke. "You are basically smoking if you breathe somebody else's smoke," LeMaistre said. "The burning cigarette is diluted but after accumulation over time, we have found large traces of nicotine in non-smokers. And there is no question people die from secondhand smoke."

Blum cited that one of

the first advances came in 1988 when the San Francisco Aviation flight attendants fought for a smoke-free working environment. Now, some state and local legislations have implemented the passage of clean indoor air laws that prohibit smoking inside buildings. And while Blum applauds this advancement, he still believes more could be done. "It's sad we have to go town by town to get these laws in place, because it should be a federal law," he said.

In UA's home city of Tuscaloosa, a no-smoking ban for restaurants went into place last January, with the only exception being those establishments with liquor licenses, which can allow





smoking from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. At the University itself, several resolutions have been proposed to ban smoking entirely on campus, and another to try to prohibit smoking within 30 feet of the entranceway to an academic building, but the Student Government Association Senate didn't pass either measure.

"We tried to compromise, after the bill failed, to designate one entrance to academic buildings as smoke-free," said R.B. Walker, SGA president. "I don't feel like a large percentage of our student population are smokers. I am committed to a healthy campus, but I'm also committed to a free-thinking campus. And we need to accommodate as many people as possible. We feel like the compromise represents a fair and reasonable approach to smoking on campus."

There are six SEC schools that have banned smoking at their football stadiums, but Bryant-Denny is not one of them. Smoking is still allowed at the facility, but only in designated areas.

Statistics show that the onset of smoking begins at an earlier age than most think. By the time young adults finish high school and move on to college, many are already addicted, and may battle the hunger for a lifetime.



LeMaistre said there is a need for "real protection" of young people. As part of their public relations strategies, tobacco companies themselves are spending billions of dollars to encourage young people not to smoke through various persuasive methods, but peer pressure easily overcomes that, LeMaistre said. "Education is so critical, before they take up the act," he said. "The first thing that needs to be done is have the parents set good examples."

Blum does point out a positive development—the dramatic reduction in cigarette ads. However, he added, concerned groups need to get involved in counter-advertising. "Businesses, universities and even health organizations need to step up to the plate more and take action," he said.

Blum remembers a time when doctors left medical conferences with cartons

of free cigarettes provided by tobacco company exhibitors. "That's changed, but there is room for much more change before we can say the fight is over," he said. He questions if today's physicians are doing enough to counteract the problem. "I don't think the profession is doing that," he said. "We treat disease very well, but we must ask where should our world be in the primary prevention of disease."

Opposite page: (top three) marketing emphasizes sex appeal and confidence; (center) a 1950 ad from the Journal of the American Medical Association; (bottom right) Dr. Alan Blum. Above: (left) new varieties of old brands are still popping up; (right) a cartoon counter-advertisement; (center) LeMaistre and Blum speak during Cancer Prevention Week on campus. (Artwork courtesy of UA's Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society)

The battle continues. While strides are being made toward a smoke-free future, tobacco is still a factor in 30 percent of all cancers, according to LeMaistre. "I'm working in cancer prevention," he said. "The primary way to achieve this is to go after the single most preventable cause." ■

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