

“THE HISTORY HOUR,” BBC, March 7, 2022

[Max Pearson, host:] In 1962 a group of UK doctors warned people of the direct link between cigarettes and lung cancer, adding that smokers were more likely to die before the age of 65. The association wasn't new, but the startling figures were, and the doctors wanted the British government to act. Clair Bose reports.

[BBC reporter, 1962:] “Today, the Royal College of Physicians published their report on smoking and lung cancer. They say conclusively and authoritatively that cigarette smoking is a cause of lung ca, causes bronchitis, and contributes to coronary heart disease.”

At the time, half of all women in Britain smoked and three quarters of all men, including this BBC reporter:

“It’s a grim report. They say for instance, that I, a cigarette smoker, has one chance in three of dying before the age of 65, whereas the non-smoker has one chance in six.”

This was the first time such stark figures had been released to the public. But the picture was complicated. People loved smoking. Politicians, scientists, doctors, and all....For decades cigarette smoking had been an important part of British life. During the second World War, tobacco was seen as an essential, and government efforts were made to encourage smoking rather than prevent it...

“[Professor Virginia Berridge of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine:] ‘The tobacco industry had been more or less under government control, very closely allied with the government during the second World War, because tobacco and smoking cigarettes was seen as something that the population needed, and tobacco tokens had been issued along the lines of food tokens, so there was that very close relationship, which continued after the war.’

Virginia Berridge says post-war it was the tax revenue from cigarettes that became essential.

[Virginia Berridge:] “Harold MacMillan when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer made an entry in his diary in 1956, and he said, “If people really think they will get cancer of the lung from smoking, it’s the end of the Budget. So he saw this as pretty much a financial disaster.”

The disaster had been brewing since before the war when it was first suggested that the increasing prevalence of a rare form of cancer of the lung might be due to cigarette smoking. Britain’s Medical Research Council began to investigate possible causes: televisions, saucepan, bananas, tarring of the roads, air pollution, and, as an afterthought, smoking.

[Virginia Berridge:] “In 1950, the statisticians Sir Austin Bradford Hill and Richard Doll published some research, and that indicated that there was an association between the rise in smoking and the rise in lung cancer deaths.”

Throughout the 1950s, more and more evidence emerged. But in the smoke-filled, yellow-walled rooms of the Houses of Parliament, little was said. One man walking those same halls was Sir George Godber, a doctor and high-ranking civil servant whose job was to advise the government on health...As a non-smoker, he was in a small minority...Here he is speaking to Oxford Brookes University years later about the moment the minister of Health, Ian McCloud, finally made a statement on the dangers smoking:

[Sir George Godber:] “Ian McCloud said alright he’d take a press conference, He wasn’t very keen on it. But he would. And he consulted the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who said, ‘Well, it’s alright for you to hold that press conference provided you smoke while you’re doing it.’ And he did. It seems absolutely incredible, but he did.”

Sir George Godber watched in horror and frustration. His hands were tied. It was, after all, up to his boss, the Chief Medical Officer, to get the Ministry of Health to take action, and his boss wasn’t keen to rock the boat. So George Godber decided to get someone else outside of government to stir things up: Charles Fletcher from the Royal College of Physicians.

[Charles Fletcher:] “We discussed what the Ministry of Health might do: and we thought of those things like trying to stop smoking in trains, trying to put posters up. But none of those seemed very likely. And at that time the Chief Medical Officer was obviously frightened of anything about it. He didn’t want to offend industry and the public. At the end of our lunch, I said to Geoge Godber, ‘Do you think it would help if our college, meaning the College of Physicians, were to produce a report about the evidence on this?’ And he said, ‘Yes, I think that might be very helpful. It might stimulate my minister to do something about it.’”

Charles Fletcher wrote the report himself. It was released in March 1962, and more than 80,000 copies of it were sold in the UK and the US. Charles Fletcher wanted to prompt government action. But he also wanted these horrific figures to be understood by anyone interested.

[Charles Fletcher:] “And we didn’t mince our words. We really did write it in simple words. We really made a parallel between this and tuberculosis and the big plagues of the past. And it was absolutely staggering. Every front page of every newspaper, ‘Doctors Say Smoking Dangerous.’ They’d never taken any notice before.”

[Virginia Berridge:] “And they held their first ever press conference to launch the report. Somebody said, ‘Well, there’s only one out of 23 people will get lung cancer who smokes, you know, is that such an issue? Should we be worried about that?’ And Charles Fletcher said, ‘Well, if you traveled on an airline where one out of every 23 planes crashed, you’d be rather worried about using that airline, wouldn’t you?’ So I think it was getting the public to understand statistics, epidemiology, relative risk.”

And the report suggested government educate people on those risks: Restrict smoking in public places, restrict advertising, and increase tax on cigarettes. The press was full of it. And the BBC devoted a whole program to it:

“According to the Royal College’s report, this is the amount that has been spent on tobacco advertising in four years: 38 million pounds. And this is what has been allocated by the government to warn people of the dangers of smoking: 5000 pounds.”

And the BBC Panorama program did something else which hadn’t been done before: It got the Royal College of Physicians to speak directly to John Partridge of the tobacco industry.

[John Partridge:] “Purely on the statistical basis of whether people smoke and how much they smoke, what more can we know about the personal characteristics of those people. It may be that some people should not smoke as much as they do.”

[Charles Fletcher:] “But you see, my medical memory goes back 40 years when this was a very rare disease. Now do you think the personal characteristics of the British race have suddenly altered in this peculiar way in 40 years?”

[Virginia Berridge:] “The tobacco industry was obviously very disconcerted by this evidence and also by the new style of public health shown in the report. They weren’t used to being kind of challenged quite in the way they were.”

But they needn’t have worried too much. As Sir George Godberg and Charles Fletcher recalled, the government’s advice was largely ignored.

[Charles Fletcher:] “The Government did nothing, except to say that they would instruct the local authorities to do some health education. And it really was extremely depressing the way the government just shoved this off as having nothing to do with us.”

[Sir George Godber:] “I always remember saying to Keith Joseph that we really had to do something like this. And he looked quite shocked and said, ‘You really can’t expect to abolish smoking?’ And I said, ‘No, but I want to see it reduced to an activity of consenting adults in private, and he didn’t like that one a bit.’”

[Max Pearson:] Smoking was eventually banned in public places in Britain in 2007, but despite that the National Health Service calculates that there are still more than 75,000 deaths in this country each year attributable to smoking-related causes.