

## **PHILIP MORRIS DID STOP SELLING MARLBORO CIGARETTES IN 1995**

As insane as this sounds, Philip Morris did pull all Marlboro cigarettes off the shelves of every store in the US in May, 1995 out of concern for the health of its consumers.

On May 26, Philip Morris chief executive officer James T. Morgan issued this statement:

“Philip Morris USA is voluntarily initiating a pre-emptive and precautionary recall of a number of its cigarette brand packings because a small percentage have defective filters that could cause temporary discomfort to smokers...The defect is attributable to a material purchased from an outside vendor and used in manufacturing filters. The material, a plasticizer, was contaminated at the vendor’s facility. The contaminant triggered a reaction that formed a substance known as methyl isothiocyanate (MITC) in the filter. Cigarettes made with the defective filters may give off a noticeable odor or have a metallic or other off-taste. Continued use of the affected product could result in temporary discomfort, including eye, nose and throat irritation, dizziness, coughing and wheezing. Pregnant women and persons suffering from respiratory conditions should avoid exposure to MITC.” (1)

The outside vendor turned out to be Hoechst Celanese, a subsidiary of the German pharmaceutical manufacturer Hoechst AG, one of the world’s largest drug companies. At the time of the Marlboro cigarettes recall, Hoechst (which through mergers was absorbed into Sanofi in the early 2000s) manufactured medications for hypertension, angina, and intermittent claudication, most notably the diuretic Lasix (furosemide). Hoechst denied any responsibility for the presence of the poison gas, whereupon Philip Morris blamed Westvaco, the company’s principal provider of packaging for cigarettes.

When I was asked for a comment that day by Paul Raeburn, medical reporter for the Associated Press, I thought he was pulling my leg. “April Fool’s Day was last month,” I said. But when he read the statement from Philip Morris, I remarked, “A company that makes products that are lethal and responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths in the United States a year seems suddenly to have taken an

interest in a little dizziness. That's what most of us that get around smoking experience anyway." He included this quote in his story.

The event became known as Marlboro Friday, and Philip Morris drew ridicule from comedians and editorial cartoonists, especially after company spokesperson such as director of scientific affairs Dr. Richard Cardin continued to make silly statements such as "Cigarettes bought before May 16 'are fine.'" (*New York Times*, May 27). (1)

On July 16 in his popular comic strip "Doonesbury," cartoonist Garry Trudeau, conjured up his cigarette company stand-in, Mr. Butts to declare:

**"Good news, kids! The defective cigarette filter crisis is over! They've all been recalled!**

**"Why did we recall them? Because we *care*! It tore us *up* knowing we had placed smokers at risk!**

**"In fact, Philip Morris now invited you to join us in a moment of silence for all of those who suffered scratchy throats or mild dizziness!**

***Little Butts:* "Psst! Dad! Shouldn't we include all those who died, too?"**

**Mr. Butts: "They're *former* smokers! This is for current customers!" (1)**

Two months following the recall, fresh Marlboros were back on store shelves. As sales resumed at their previous level, Philip Morris executives were breathing sighs of relief.

Alan Blum, MD

1. "The Philip Morris Recall." *Tobacco Control* Volume 4, pages 282-286, 1995.