

Tobacco Industry Persistent

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Back in December 1969, several members of the tobacco industry filed a lawsuit against the three television networks to stop the showing of advertisements which state or imply that “cigarettes will kill people who smoke them.”

The suit claimed each of these anti-cigarette ads “was false or made with reckless disregard of whether said statement was false or not because there is no scientific evidence of any causal connection between cigarette smoking and lung cancer, heart disease, tuberculosis and bronchial or respiratory disorders.”

This lawsuit, which failed, came five years after the U.S. Surgeon General found that cigarette smoking did indeed increase the risk of many diseases. Hundreds of authoritative studies worldwide were added in the 1970s to the mass of evidence analyzed by the Surgeon General’s report. In 1979, the Surgeon General’s office issued an 1,100-page report based on a review of more than 30,000 articles and scientific studies. Last year another report from the same office called smoking this nation’s “single most important preventable cause of death.”

Has the tobacco industry changed its mind? Not one puff. The Tobacco Institute still asserts that there is no evidence of any detrimental health effects from smoking. Yet, even studies financed by the tobacco companies themselves say that smoking increases the risk of certain diseases. This finding is contained in a report titled “Tobacco and Health,” issued in 1978 by the American Medical Association Education and Research Fund and supported by tobacco industry grants.

Scores of medical, public health, insurance, academic and even non-tobacco industry groups agree with the required notice on all cigarette advertising: “The Surgeon General has determined that cigarette smoking is dangerous to your health.”

More than 300,000 deaths annually in this country are related to smoking, accounting for 80 percent of all lung cancer deaths and large percentages of heart disease and other lung disease and cancer fatalities. Pregnant women, infants and other susceptible persons are particularly vulnerable.

All this led to a recent Federal Trade Commission (FTC) analysis of what people realize about specific health hazards of smoking as compared with what medical science knows. The agency’s conclusion: “Millions of consumers lack knowledge of or hold false beliefs about these basic, important medical facts.”

Barred from television, the tobacco companies persist in luring youngsters into smoking with print advertisements that exude pictures and images of physical health, vigor, sporting settings and the rugged outdoors. Why do newspapers, to take on print medium, continue to accept these advertisements?

Twelve major newspapers explained their policy to us. Eleven of them carry cigarette ads because it is legal to do so and, they say, the ads are not fraudulent or immoral. In addition, most of the newspapers alluded to the importance of the revenue.

The Chicago Sun-Times said that since it is “not illegal to smoke tobacco,...we have a responsibility to our readers and advertisers to allow them all the rights as provided by the Constitution.”

The Washington Post prints ads as long as the statements therein “are true, are not illegal or in poor taste.” The mighty New York Times sets its own standards for acceptance of cigarette advertising. As long as the FTC-required warning appears in the ad, the Times finds existing cigarette ads in full compliance with the newspaper’s standards.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch informs that 11 years ago it dropped all cigarette advertising. In 1975, the paper reports, “We lifted the ban against cigarette advertising because, frankly, we needed the revenue. Readers didn’t seem to notice the restoration of this advertising any more than they had noticed its absence.”

Editor William B. Smart of the Desert News (Salt Lake City) was unequivocal, declaring that his newspaper “does not now, never has, and never will carry cigarette advertisements.”

The FTC study makes a detailed case, based on up-to-date consumer polling and the medical literature, that many people are uninformed about the specific health hazards of smoking (for example, smoking during pregnancy). The old printed warning does not exonerate the ad from charges of being misleading, according to the study.

But take a simple approach of conscience. Would not the publishers and editors of newspapers sleep better at night if they denied their pages to the blatant promotion of an addictive product whose consumption is associated with nearly one thousand deaths a day?

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