

HIV EXAMINER

A Monthly Newsletter of Writers Against Aids and Tobacco Smoking

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Report Calls Smoking Health Peril

Report Calls Smoking Definite Health Peril

U.S. Surgeon General's Panel Links Tobacco to Cancer, Other Diseases

Los Angeles Times

January 12, 1964

The landmark report of the United States Surgeon General discussed in this 1964 *Los Angeles Times* article, linked cigarette smoking to cancer. The conclusions, developed by a panel of scientists, led to government restrictions on tobacco products and contributed to a general decline in smoking. Some of the statistics and conclusions cited may have been revised or updated since the report was published.

By Robert C. Toth

Washington—The surgeon general's expert committee emphatically blamed cigarette smoking Saturday for causing certain diseases and for contributing to an over-all higher death rate among smokers.

It urged steps to combat the habit of 65 million to 70 million Americans, but made no specific recommendations. It was not asked to do so.

“Cigarette smoking is a health hazard of sufficient importance in the United States to warrant appropriate remedial action,” its exhaustive 387-page report declared.

The findings were all that anti-smoking forces could hope for.

The committee accepted all important statistical links found in the past between smoking and disease, and then went further to brand smoking the overwhelming cause of lung cancer, chronic bronchitis, and cancer of the larynx (voice box).

Total Proof Lacking

The weight of evidence coming from animal tests, autopsies, clinical studies and population surveys converged with sufficient impact to require the “cause” label to be affixed, even though absolute proof in all details may still be lacking, the committee said.

Eleven other diseases were associated with smoking, such as heart disease and emphysema (a lung ailment), which may or may not be literally caused by smoking. The data is not sufficient.

Heart disease takes more American lives than any other illness—more than 500,000 last year. If smoking causes this disease, it takes its greatest toll here. Lung cancer deaths number 41,000 a year and bronchitis about 15,000 a year.

No simple cause-and-effect relation is likely to be found between the complex products in smoke and a specific disease in the variable human body, the committee said. However, statistics show smokers die 70% more often than non-smokers of heart and artery diseases. The risk is diminished by stopping smoking.

Prudent Assumption

It is “more prudent” to assume that cigarette smoking causes coronary disease, than to wait until no uncertainty remains, the committee reported.

In the over-all picture, male smokers have a 70% higher death rate than nonsmokers. Female smokers run less apparent risk, whether because they smoke less than men or because of some hormonal or other sex-related defense.

Dr. Luther L. Terry, the surgeon general, said his Public Health Service will “move promptly to determine” the steps it might take to institute remedial action.

He said the service is presently considering a more intense educational campaign against smoking, beamed at both the public and the medical and health professionals. There is also the possibility of requiring hazard warnings on cigarette packages and advertisements and limits on television and radio commercials, he said.

Meanwhile, Dr. Terry said that if he had patients today, he would “advise them to discontinue smoking. If they continue, it should be with the clear understanding that they are taking a definite health risk,” he said.

He recently switched from cigarettes to a pipe.

Pipe smokers who smoke less than 10 pipefuls a day, and cigar smokers who consume five or less daily, run a slightly higher chance of lung cancer than non-smokers, but considerably less than cigarette smokers, the committee reported.

Pipe smoking, however, causes lip cancer and is associated with, but not the proven cause of, other mouth cancers, according to the report.

The committee's conclusions shattered several theories promoted by tobacco companies and some scientists in the past to cast doubt on the links between smoking and disease. Among these were:

Filters—"There was no evidence given the committee to show that filters have any effect on reducing the health hazard from smoking," according to Dr. James M. Hundley, assistant surgeon general, who sat with the committee.

Air Pollution—It contributes little to the lung cancer death rate in the general population. Similarly, smoking is a much greater cause of bronchitis and other lung ailments than either air pollution or occupational exposures, the committee said.

Urbanization—No established relation was shown between the size of a community and its lung cancer rate. Non-smokers who move from rural to urban areas have a higher death rate in general than non smokers who have always lived in the cities, the report noted.

Personality—No accepted evidence was found of a clear-cut difference between smokers and non-smokers that could explain their different death rates, even though smokers are inclined to be more neurotic and extrovert in their behavior, the report said.

In over-all terms, men who smoke less than 10 cigarettes a day have a 40% higher death rate from all causes than non-smokers. Ten to 19 cigarettes a day mean a 70% higher rate; one to two packs a day, 90% higher; and more than two packs a day, 120%.

Men who started smoking before 20 years of age "have a substantially higher death rate than those who began after age 25," the committee reported. The risk increases with the number of years of smoking and is higher for men who stop after age 55 than those who stop earlier.

For specific diseases, the report said average male smokers will get lung cancer 9 to 10 times more often than non-smokers, and heavy smokers 20 times more often. "The data for women, while less extensive, points in the same direction," it said. The risk in all cases "is diminished by discontinuing smoking."

Cigarette smoking causes bronchitis, and increases sixfold the risk of dying from it and emphysema. Smokers get cancer of the larynx 5.4 times more often than non-smokers.

Bladder cancer is associated with cigarette smoking, and cancer of the esophagus with all smoking. Death rates from these diseases are 0.9 and 3.4 times greater, respectively, for smokers than for non-smokers.

Deaths from circulatory diseases are 2.6 times greater for cigarette smokers. For coronary heart disease it is 1.7 times higher; for hypersensitive hearts 1.5 times; for general arteriosclerosis 1.5 times, and for other heart diseases 1.7 times.

Pregnant women who smoke tend to have babies which weigh less at birth. It is not known whether this affects the fitness of the baby.

Source: *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1964.

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