

TO SMOKE OR NOT TO SMOKE (Originally published April 1976)

A classic essay on smoking appeared in Lin Yutang's philosophical book, *The Importance of Living*, published in 1937. He divided the world into smokers and nonsmokers. He didn't object to all nonsmokers, only to those in that category who tried to interfere with the smokers. "It is true," he wrote, "that smokers cause some nuisance to the nonsmokers, but this nuisance is physical, while the nuisance that the nonsmokers cause the smokers is spiritual."

Smokers, to Dr. Lin, were morally superior to nonsmokers, whom he considered "righteous, unemotional and unpoetic souls." In regard to one of the benefits of smoking, he quoted Thackeray, who wrote, "The pipe draws wisdom from the lips of the philosopher, and shuts up the mouths of the foolish." He looked upon his one, agonizing, three-week attempt to give up cigarettes as a disgraceful lapse into moral irresponsibility. He was relieved when his conscience finally forced him to light up again, restoring him once more to sanity and clear thinking.

But Dr. Lin was writing in those uncomplicated times of the 1930s, and he did not have to contend with ecology freaks, anti-pollutionists, medical zealots, militant health faddists and the Surgeon General. Yet even as he wrote, one of the most ardent champions of nonsmoking was forging the link between cigarettes and lung cancer.

We were on the scene when Dr. Alton Ochsner, our Professor of Surgery at Tulane, lost interest in lumbar blocks and sympathectomies and began taking out lungs. He appropriated Evarts Graham's ideas, made them his own and sent his number one scut boy, Mike DeBakey, into the files and records to accumulate data. For many years to follow, his was almost a one-man crusade to incriminate the cigarette.

Ochsner was a marvelous teacher, a forceful speaker, always positive and intimidatingly authoritative. As students (and later as interns and residents on his service), we became accustomed to his enthusiasms, and we watched in fascination as he became more and more convinced that smoking caused lung cancer.

Looking back on those years, it may have been his relentless determination to impose on us his smoking/lung cancer dictum that made most of us react negatively. Perhaps it was just ordinary medical student skepticism and resentment of authority, or perhaps we were influenced by our knowledge of the breezy way he collected statistics and made them fit his predetermined conclusions. In any event he failed to convert us.

Our own love affair with cigarettes dates back to the usual, secretive childhood attempts, but we didn't become a confirmed, open smoker until entering college at 16. For more than four decades now we've remained loyal to our short, old fashioned, unfiltered Camels. At one time or another, we've switched temporarily to try nearly all of them from the old Three Kings, Virginia Extras, Fatimas, ivory-tipped Marlboros and Murads of the late Twenties, to the Luckies, Chesterfields, Philip Morris's, Raleigh's, Old Golds, Spuds, and Kools of

the Thirties. During World War II there were also times when we had to make do with Twenty Grands Wings and Avalons as well as British Players and Sweet Caparals and even French *Gauloises and Elegantes*. The innumerable varieties of post-war filter-tips, king-sizes, and super-longs have also been tried recently, but invariably we've returned to *Camels* – and may they go on forever.

Since childhood we've known that cigarettes were bad things and, if you can ignore heredity, they certainly stunted our growth. In medical school also it became obvious that smoking was an unhealthy habit and had detrimental effects on the respiratory and circulatory systems. And now that the Surgeon General has long since determined, and states publicly on cigarette packages, that smoking is dangerous to our health, who can argue that Dr. Ochsner wasn't right?

Still, as an habitual smoker who enjoys the habit, we are not in sympathy with the efforts of anti-smoking reformers, medical and otherwise, who, on the basis of shaky scientific evidence, insist on improving our health through dictatorial bans. Like Lin Yutang, we consider them nuisances who would disturb our spiritual peace. The Soul-savers and Nosey Parkers had their way once and prohibited alcohol for 14 Volstead Act years, and their famous experiment failed miserably. Individual health is not something to be controlled by government decree.

To smoke or not to smoke? Everyone must die of something one day. A year sooner... a year later? A few may hope to be fortunate enough to pop off suddenly from a massive coronary or cerebral accident, but for most, terminal illness will be an uncomfortable affair. So, is there any real advantage in not dying of lung cancer only to go with uremia, arteriosclerotic disintegration, leukemia, stomach, bowel or ovarian carcinoma? Besides, think of all those *Camels* you could have been enjoying.