

HEALTH AND SMOKING

(Originally published February 1979)

The fifteenth anniversary of the surgeon general's report on cigarette smoking came and went, leaving behind a second, costly statistical rehash of some 30,000 old and new studies on smoking culled from the medical literature. The second report presented no startling new findings and concluded, once again, that smoking is bad for you. Although a new surgeon general issued it, there was little doubt that the new report was the baby of our hyperactive Secretary of HEW, Joe Califano, and he welcomed the opportunity to grab a little publicity and unload a new barrage of propaganda.

Califano is an expert at throwing around the unqualified statistic and the ambiguous percentage, and he did not hesitate to use them in blaming the cigarette for much of mankind's suffering. With typical abandon, he estimated that "cigarettes may cause 346,000 deaths" this year. (The "may" in such statements is always a convenient loophole.) He has budgeted another 30 million dollars of HEW funds for use this year against smoking. His concern for our health and his anti-smoking crusade might be more believable if there were some evidence that his credentials in medical matters were adequate. Unfortunately, the Secretary of HEW has none. Califano is an ambitious, political bureaucrat interested primarily in acquiring power and advancing his own career in government; an authentic member of the class identified by former Secretary of the Treasury, William Simon, as "noxious, authoritarian parasites on society, with a tendency to augment their own size and power and to cultivate a parasitical clientele in all classes of society."

One would think that the disastrous experience with the Volstead Act and alcohol might have taught the government something about the futility of attempting to regulate by law a personal habit considered detrimental to health. Unless the federal government intends to make the same mistake again and promote another prohibiting amendment, it should leave the smoking controversy alone. Why waste an additional 30 million dollars in tax money on a problem already over investigated and over publicized? Let the medical men and their smoking patients worry over it.

The problem of smoking and health is not a difficult one to understand. Smoking does not "cause" cancer, nor lung disease, nor circulatory disease, nor any of the other ailments attributed to it. It is just one factor (and a medically important one) among many factors, which will increase the chances that a chronic smoker MAY ultimately develop one or more of several, selective, serious, and disabling illnesses. This knowledge has been around since before Mr. Califano was born, and by now the general public has become more than well informed about the dangers of smoking. It should be left entirely up to the

individual to weigh the evidence, seek advice and decide whether or not to take the smoking risk.

Smoking is undoubtedly an unnecessary, stupid and expensive habit but, to the confirmed smoker, a pleasurable one. To the non-smoker it is no problem at all. He can continue to die, to paraphrase Califano, "at a rate 70% less frequently from all causes" than his smoking cousin. A small satisfaction he might well want to think about on his deathbed.

(c) *The Bulletin of the Muscogee County (Georgia) Medical Society*, "Doctor's Lounge", Feb 1979, Vol. XXVI No.2, p.13