

SMOKING AND HEALTH -- A PERSPECTIVE

Attacks against tobacco smoking began shortly after the custom was introduced to Western Europe in the sixteenth century. At first, the reasons for the attacks varied, but gradually they began to focus on the alleged health effects of smoking. Practically from the beginning, smoking and health discussions have tended to be highly charged with emotion. Some might even suggest that a crusade against smoking and the smoker has developed.

In recent years, the emotional atmosphere surrounding tobacco has created a situation in which it is far easier to indict smoking as the cause of human disease than to confront the data which do not support that view. For example, a recent study which found a significant increase in lung cancer among nonsmokers received little public attention. Is it because wide acceptance of its finding would complicate what some people want to believe is a closed issue? After all, if smoking were the primary cause of lung cancer as many anti-smokers contend, it would logically follow that lung cancer mortality should be almost nonexistent among nonsmokers. But this study clearly shows that nonsmokers do develop lung cancer. In fact, although the author appears to believe in the smoking-lung cancer theory,

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he conceded that other factors must have "a significant effect" on lung cancer mortality.¹

The concentration on smoking as the claimed cause of disease has prompted concern among many researchers and scientists. An eminent scientist and pathologist, for example, believes that "a great oversimplification of the complexity of the scientific problems" has occurred. In his opinion, the problems involving diseases associated with smoking are not "going to be solved by simple answers. They are complex or they would already have been solved."² Other scientists have expressed concern that the concentration on smoking may be diverting research attention from other factors that reportedly have been associated with human disease. A Canadian researcher, for example, contends that "smoking appears to have been used to divert attention away from the effects of occupational and of environmental exposures" on disease.³

Why then do these anti-smoking campaigns continue with such intensity? Part of the answer may lie in the stated goal of some anti-smoking individuals and organizations to create a nonsmoking society in which smoking is viewed as deviant behavior and the smoker as a social outcast. Their desire, however, to make smoking socially unacceptable should not be allowed to distort the smoking and health issue. The belief that such distortion has occurred was articulated by one scientist who has

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been intensively involved in smoking and health research: "When it comes to tobacco, opinions are given often with such emotionalism that there is very little discussion, much less⁴ scientific objectivity."

However, scientific objectivity is essential in considering the complex issues of disease causation. This objectivity can sometimes be difficult to maintain amidst the avalanche of claims about smoking and its effects on health. Nonetheless, many scientists in the smoking and health field maintain the view that a legitimate and continuing scientific dispute exists and that answers will be found only through unbiased scientific inquiry.

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References

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