Blaming tobacco's victims

S Chapman

People who develop diseases as a result of smoking are victims of the tobacco industry's tactics, and do not deserve to be blamed for their "own misdeeds".

The devastating judgment in the Supreme Court of Victoria against British American Tobacco (Australia) following evidence of its 17 year programme of document destruction seems destined to become a milestone in the pursuit of justice for the tobacco industry's millions of victims. However, although Liberman points out in this issue that the legal implications of the case may be momentous, public discussion of the case in Australia provides sobering reminders of the power of victim blaming to undermine what otherwise would be unequivocally good news.

Fifty one year old Rolah McCabe, the woman who brought the case against BAT, was in every respect a typical tobacco victim. She started smoking at 12, rapidly developed a dependency on nicotine, and by middle age was diagnosed with lung cancer. If she dies within the next year as predicted, she will lose 30 years off the lifespan that the average Australian woman can expect within the next year as predicted, she will lose 30 years off the lifespan that the average Australian woman can expect today. Over 4200 Australians aged less than 65 die each year from diseases caused by tobacco.

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The acres of documentary evidence now available on industry nicotine manipulation do not make public everything about the industry, but they do provide a foundation on which to build strategic responses by tobacco control advocates.

UNDERMINING VICTIM BLAMING

There are three cornerstones that can together work both legally and rhetorically to undermine the powerful victim blaming frame. The first is the Pied Piper metaphor. For all the sanctimonious re-urbanising that has taken place in the tobacco industry (tobacco now "causes" disease—see News Analysis p 172), it is significant that the industry has resolutely clung to its public position that it does not want children to smoke. It knows that all societies revile those who would seduce and harm children, exploiting their innocence. It is thus inconceivable that the industry might ever swallow the truth serum powerful enough to cause it to say "We confess: we love it when children smoke! As our shareholders know, children's money is as good as any adult's. The earlier they start, the more money we get." With tobacco, the script for the Pied Piper metaphor could have been written in Business Studies 101: "Realistically, if our company is to survive and prosper . . . we must get our share of the youth market" and no amount of denial and sugar coated earnestness about "adult choice" can ever make this bottom line reality go away. Thanks again to the revelations in their own documents, robotic denials about their designs on children may now be comprehensively matched with hundreds of gawking sales forecasts about the contributions of new smokers from the teenage market and focus group research on how children might use different brands to badge themselves, totemic style, in their relentless pursuit of teenage tribal identity.

The industry's second bête noir is addiction. As a now infamous 1980 Tobacco Institute memo expressed so plainly: "Shook, Hardy and Bacon [the tobacco industry’s lawyers] reminds us . . . that the entire matter of addiction is the most potent weapon a prosecuting attorney can have in a lung cancer/cigarette case. We can't defend continued smoking as 'free choice' if the person was 'addicted.'" The acres of documentary evidence now available on industry nicotine manipulation (for example, Philip Morris Australia arranging to have Marlboro reformulated: "our aim is to make Red and Special Mild as close as possible to the USA blend and thus make it harder for existing smokers to leave the product") evoke nothing less than imagery of scheming industrial chemists setting out to maximise addiction.

When this material is set next to the industry's blue-in-the-face denials on addiction, its desperate efforts to resist "addiction" on pack warnings, and its trivialisation via comparisons with chewing gum, chocolate, and television viewing, recourse to glib talk about free choice sounds simply puerile.

Finally, there is the sordid 40 year history now being painstakingly unearthed by tobacco control's document archaeologists who have found pharaohs' tombs full of private acknowledgement about tobacco causing disease, overlain by massive international programmes of public obfuscation and reassurance, and tame scientist dissembling. For every newspaper report that smoking was harmful, there were dozens of advertisements whose entire choreography said...
“forget all that! This is what smoking means!” And sprinkled liberally throughout the bad news on smoking were hundreds of carefully orchestrated stories placed by the industry’s PR machine about air pollution causing all the cancer, confounders like diet and pet bird keeping, and apparent anomalies of low lung cancer in high smoking populations. The industry built lists of everyday agents and practices said to be dangerous which had ever been the subject of news reports, and distributed these to its spokespeople so that they could put it to news reports, and distributed these to its agents and practices said to be dangerous - low lung cancer in high smoking populations. Among these will be slide sets showing the “worst of” the tobacco industry documents. We believe these powerful tools will greatly assist advocates around the world to shame the industry, to bring justice to its victims, and to inspire governments to exert further control over the industry’s activities.

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