Missing the biggest story in the US Surgeon General’s report

Ruth E Malone

The recent release of the 50th anniversary US Surgeon General’s (SG) report on the health consequences of smoking marked a milestone and has garnered extensive press coverage. The massive document covers many important topics, from the history of the tobacco disease epidemic to the international context within which contemporary tobacco-focused efforts are occurring, including the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and the implications of trade agreements. Little noted in media coverage to date, however, is the fact that for the first time, the document includes explicit references to ‘end game’ strategies, and repeatedly calls for ending—rather than merely controlling, or reducing the toll from—the tobacco epidemic. This is a signal achievement given that the SG reports always undergo extensive review and vetting before being press-released and published as high-profile government documents. It indicates that the US government may finally be ready to move beyond the cautious, politically safe ‘preventing youth from starting and helping smokers quit’ mentality toward a comprehensive plan to end the epidemic.2 3 Simply to use the term ‘end game’ in such a landmark document is to advance its legitimacy and move the official discourse beyond the status quo. Its importance should not be underestimated.

But the report goes beyond merely pointing to an entire industry as the cause of an epidemic or blaming the victim attitudes, make cessation a priority in practice and move the political narrative forward. It’s far from over. But 50 years after a report that changed the landscape of health in the US, and decades after the tobacco companies themselves anticipated it, we may be inching closer to an endgame.

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