In reply—Although the context of my comments would suggest that I was referring to Western cigarettes, which on average produce lower levels of tar than most cigarette brands available in Asia, I would maintain that the hoped for reduction in lung cancer deaths of a dramatic nature in low exposures in tar levels is an illusion. Indeed, such a principle has enabled the tobacco industry to have become, in effect, our leading health educator, as increasing numbers of consumers have switched to lower tar brands—rather than stopping smoking—in the misguided belief that they can smoke more safely. Since 1979 reports of the US Surgeon General have warned that individuals who shift to smoking lower tar brands may in fact increase their health risk through compensatory deeper inhalation and the smoking of more cigarettes. The estimate by Peto and Lopez of 3 million deaths annually would appear to be smoking the low tar brands. In 1990s calls for bold actions that create disincentives for the use and promotion of tobacco, both on individual and societal levels. Continued clamour for a reduction in tar yields in cigarettes is a strategy that smacks of compromise with state run tobacco monopolies and an inability to imagine the dismantling of multinational tobacco conglomerates. It is good of Mr Peto to allude to "other important aspects of tobacco control." I can think of few global tobacco control strategies less important than the promotion of lower tar cigarettes. ALAN BLUM

Editor, News and Commentary


In reply—Because the credit line for News Analysis did not appear until the end of the section, some readers assumed that the articles in it were unsigned. All of the articles were in fact written by Dr Alan Blum. Dr Blum, who has been active in tobacco control for more than 20 years, is the former editor of the Medical Journal of Australia and the New York State Journal of Medicine. The theme issues on tobacco that he produced in 1983 at those journals were the first of their kind and a forerunner of Tobacco Control.

With respect to the production of low tar cigarettes, I find myself somewhere between the positions articulated by Mr Peto and Dr Blum. Yes, a reduction in tar yields may be helpful in countries such as China, where the average tar yield is high and where public awareness of the health hazards of smoking is low. But as Dr Blum points out, the availability of "safer" cigarettes may reduce smoking cessation by giving health conscious smokers another alternative to quitting—that is, switching to lower yield brands. In developing countries this effect may be minimal because so few smokers are contemplating quitting. In countries where tobacco consumption is on the decline the adverse effect of low tar cigarettes in discouraging smoking cessation may dwarf any public health benefit from their slightly lower carcinogenicity in the United States the cigarette industry has spent a disproportionate amount of its advertising and promotional budget on low-tar brands, using the implicit messages that these brands are less hazardous or safer. It's efforts, aided a bit by the federal government's "safe cigarette" programme in the 1970s, have had a substantial impact. The domestic market for cigarettes (≤ 15 mg) has exceeded 50% since 1981. According to the 1986 Adult Use of Tobacco Survey (AUTS), 38% of adult smokers have switched from one cigarette brand to another "just to reduce the amount of tar and nicotine." The AUTS also showed that 21% of smokers believe that the kind of cigarettes they smoke are "probably less hazardous than others." How many of these smokers might have quit low tar cigarettes had they never been introduced, or if the misleading advertisements for those brands had been banned?

Despite the importance and complexity of these issues, little research has been conducted to elucidate the whole impact of low yield cigarettes on the population. Besides the potential effect of low tar cigarettes in discouraging smoking cessation, other important questions remain unanswered and, indeed, unexplored. Because low yield cigarettes are less harsh, do they facilitate experimentation with and initiation of smoking among children and adolescents? The heavier use of flavouring agents in low tar brands create risks not present in higher tar cigarettes? What are the promotional campaigns for the new generation of products aimed at health conscious smokers, such as denicotinised cigarettes, perfumed cigarettes ("the first cigarette that-smells good"), and cigarettes such as to have less sidestream smoke? We encourage research and further commentary on this subject.

RONALD M DAVIS

Editor


Dialogue with the tobacco industry

To the editor—I refer to a comment addressed to Dr S T Han, regional director of the Western Pacific Regional Office of the World Health Organisation (WHO), suggesting dialogue between health advocates and the tobacco industry.

Dr Han made this remark at an APACT (Asian Pacific Association for the Control of Tobacco) regional conference in Seoul in 1991 as part of a rousing address that encouraged delegates from Asia to take strong action against tobacco.

At the meeting similar criticism was made by a Western tobacco control advocate about Dr Han's remarks on aiming at a "frank exchange of knowledge and opinions" with the tobacco industry.

I attended this meeting and explained to the advocate and to the meeting that Dr Han was speaking from the Asian perspective whereas health professionals are dealing not only with the commercial transnational tobacco companies but also with national tobacco monopolies.

The monopolies currently behave very differently from the commercial transnational companies. In general, Asian monopolies admit the health hazards of tobacco, cooperate with government measures, and do not advertise their products.

I personally have had experience of working with government monopolies—for example, in China and Vietnam. These countries have supported tobacco control measures such as funding tobacco control conferences, and supported tobacco control legislation. Of course this cooperation is partial and almost certainly temporary, but while it lasts is worth utilising in context.

JUDITH MACKAY

Director, Asian Consultancy on Tobacco Control, Hong Kong

1 Sixth item under heading "What did you do in the (tobacco) war, Daddy?" Tobacco Control 1992; 1: 1-11.