

# Other people's smoke: what's in a name?

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Opinions differ over what term should be used to describe "other people's smoke"

The editors at *Tobacco Control* are sometimes asked by authors for our policy on the nomenclature that should be used when referring to "other people's smoke". To date, the journal has not had a policy of standardising a preferred term, as is the case throughout the research literature (table 1).

Some in our field are passionate about one term over another, and believe that it is important that use be standardised. So what are the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates?

## THE TERMS

### Passive smoking

The industry was privately referring to "passive smoke exposure" from as far back as 1962,<sup>1</sup> and "passive smoking" appears to have been first used in the title of a scientific paper in 1970 in a German journal, where the expression was considered so strange as to warrant being placed in inverted commas.<sup>2</sup> By 1972, the term began to be used without being highlighted.<sup>3</sup> It was first used in an English language journal in 1975,<sup>4</sup> and while it was the expression that dominated scientific and public discourse about the topic in the early period, the LexisNexis data in the table show that "secondhand smoke" is now overwhelmingly the term most used in the English speaking news media.

As early as 1973, there is evidence that at least one highly placed individual in Philip Morris loathed the term "passive smoking" and urged PM's associates to not use it, counselling instead that the tongue twister "effects of tobacco smoke on non-smokers" be adopted. Some would argue that if the tobacco industry

dislikes a term, then they must know something important about its impact. If their interests are antithetical to those of the public health community, it is argued by some that terms that get their heads spinning should be used whenever possible. But while "passive smoking" describes an act, it is not a satisfactory term ("passive smoke") to describe the agents being inhaled by those exposed. An expression is obviously needed that also describes what it is that goes into the air in the exhaled and sidestream mixture that can be inhaled by others. Additionally, "passive" might be argued to carry slight connotations of indifference which are unfortunate in the context of the annoyance often felt by non-smokers who feel anything but passive in their inability to avoid the exposure.

### Environmental tobacco smoke

The first published use of this term can be traced to the title of the proceedings of an industry sponsored meeting held in Bermuda in 1974,<sup>5</sup> edited by industry consultant Ragner Rylander who claimed it gave "a more precise definition of the exposure than "passive" or "involuntary" smoking"<sup>6</sup> after having abandoned the original title "tobacco smoke effects on the non-smoker".<sup>7</sup> Again, since the term has industry origins, is that reason enough to shun its use, or might it be a case of the "devil having the best tunes"? The term is connotatively neutral, which in many contexts of use in our journal, will be appropriate. Its acronym, ETS, has the virtue of brevity, always a plus for editors. It is the term also responsible for causing environmental health agencies to show concern.

### Secondhand smoke

"Secondhand smoke" (and smoking), which is easily abbreviated as SHS, has come to dominate discourse about this issue in the USA, although it is less used elsewhere. Some argue that the term translates awkwardly into some other languages, although as *Tobacco Control* is published in English, this is not a major concern. Its proponents argue, importantly, that it puts the focus on the exposed non-smoker, linking the smoke to those who will inhale it. "Secondhand" additionally connotes notions of being used, devalued, and perhaps engendering disease, which many would consider apposite. On the other hand, some would argue that in a throwaway world of scarce resources that increasingly discards goods before they lose their usefulness, "secondhand" can also be a virtuous epithet.

### Involuntary smoking

This term is unsatisfactory as a general descriptor because—inconveniently for some in tobacco control—a significant minority of people exposed to smoke in settings like bars do indeed "volunteer" to be there and do not object to the exposure. So while for many, the term highlights the coercive nature of unwanted exposure, it will often be inaccurate.

### Tobacco smoke pollution

Joe Cherner argues that this is the only term the industry refuses to use, and therefore it should be the term of choice because "nobody likes pollution" (Globalink posting, 17 March 2003). This is a strong argument for choosing the term in public discourse where the objective is to shape public opinion against allowing exposure. But in a scholarly journal where scientific detachment is assumed in original research papers, the deliberately emotive intent of the term will generally be inappropriate.

## POLICY

The editors feel that, depending on the context of use, all the terms above have their place in the journal. We do not wish to impose any limiting orthodoxy on authors, but will continue to assess the appropriateness of each occasion of use.

**Table 1** Frequency of use of various terms for "other people's smoke"

Term used	In <i>Tobacco Control</i> titles (March 1992 to February 2003)	In <i>Tobacco Control</i> full text* (March 1998 to February 2003)	In Medline titles (1966 to 1 March 2003)	In Lexis-Nexis news database (global) (14 February to 14 March 2003)
Environmental tobacco smoke or ETS	29	149	1296	182
Secondhand (or second hand) smoke/smoking	2	51	147	818
Involuntary smoke/smoking	–	23	66	2
Passive smoke/smoking	10	113	1621	102

\*Number of individual papers using the terms.

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