Letters to the Editor

Smokers in Marvel Comics

To the Editor – Marvel Comics has recently received praise from such sources as the New England Journal of Medicine (1994; 330: 131) and the Columbia Journalism Review (January/February 1995: 20) because they cancelled trading cards showing characters (heroes and villains) smoking. In addition, trade advertisements stating “These Spokespeople will Never Smoke...” (published in Tobacco Control 1994; 3: 199) demonstrate Marvel’s commitment to health via communication with kids. Marvel’s comic books, however, the major communicator of the company, tell a different story.

A recent survey of the popular X men titles, reveals an abundance of characters (the heroes, the role models) smoking. Some of these are established adult characters whose smoking is, unfortunately, part of their person. “Wolverine”, the mutant warrior, can smoke with impunity because he has a “healing factor” which protects him from harm. Teenagers, who consider themselves immune from the health effects of tobacco, will surely be consolled by this character. “Gambit,” the Cajun thief, lives for adventures and risk-taking, and smoking enhances the image. Although the behaviour of these characters may be excused because they are adults, recent actions by Marvel have exceeded these limits when they introduced teenage smokers.

The new character of “Skin” is an egregious example of this figure. He is a 16-year-old, extremely ugly Hispanic teenager, insecure about his appearance, who gets by with attitude. Part of this “attitude” is his smoking behaviour. His character sends just the wrong message to teenage readers: if you’re upset about your looks and your standing in the world, use tobacco to calm down/project a tough attitude. A recent issue of Generation Next (March 1995) takes this even further. Here we have “Shadowcat”, a teenage character who is talented, tough, and beautiful. For no apparent reason (and in a change from her previous characterisation) we see her casually smoking after a fight scene. The message is clear: even respected, dominant teenagers smoke, either to relieve stress or for no reason at all.

Marvel characters are important figures to a huge number of children and youth. There is no reason that these heroes should be modeling dangerous, addictive behaviour to project images of idealised rebellion. I call on Marvel Comics to immediately change this behaviour in their comics as they have done in their trading cards. They owe it to their loyal public.

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Women and tobacco

To the Editor – We answered a letter from Deborah McCellan voicing dissatisfaction about the Ninth World Conference resolutions on 21 March 1995. Discovering that the letter has been published in the letters section of Tobacco Control, I would like to request that our response to her also be published in Tobacco Control. It is unfor-

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tunate that dissatisfaction exists concerning the Conference resolutions, as it should be remembered that a considerably important step has been taken in attempting to create an agenda for action on an international scale, by obtaining approval for the strategies from international bodies other than the conference organisers.

The pertinent portion of my reply to Ms McLellan was as follows:

You wrote, as the president of the International Network of Women Against Tobacco (INWAT), to voice dissatisfaction with the final resolutions of the 9th World Conference on Tobacco and Health, in that there was no specific call for more equitable participation by women at world conferences, and that issues of women and tobacco were not included in the International Strategy for Tobacco Control. No recommendations for other world conferences were included in the resolutions, as it was felt that the time for joining internal recommendations with those for the greater society had passed, and that recommendations should in all cases have relevance beyond the conference itself. Rest assured, however, that we forwarded your suggested resolution to the organisers of the Tenth World Conference.

The International Strategy for Tobacco Control omits no-one and attempts to include a strategy applicable to all people throughout the world. Surely you agree that the nine points of the international strategy address women's issues? They are: legislation to ban direct and indirect advertising; legislation to protect young people from tobacco promotion and sales; policies to discourage the onset and maintenance of tobacco use; policies to increase taxes and remove taxes from the cost-of-living index; to discourage tobacco production, to control smuggling; effective health warnings and regulations; smoke-free public policies; policies to block marketing initiatives, monitoring of the pandemic and the consequent tobacco control measures.

We share with you concern for the societies where girls' and women's uptake rates are high or growing, or both, and for the societies where women do not smoke in great numbers, but who will, as they become even slightly more financially or culturally independent, be massively targeted by the tobacco industry. The carefully negotiated International Strategy can surely be improved upon - for example, by including more specific calls for protection of girls and women. Despite its flaws, it already has the backing of numerous organisations, and is being proposed throughout the world as guidelines for action. We feel it would be counter-productive to switch or add to its contents without renegotiating with all of the national and international bodies that have given their approval. Here we can suggest that the role of INWAT might be to follow up the International Strategy with specific proposals for women in those areas where you believe that women's needs might be forgotten or underestimated.

We hope that beyond your discontent, we can find agreement by drawing upon your specific expertise concerning women and tobacco to continue to define and encourage necessary and effective actions.

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