Smoke-free soccer: US women take the lead

US Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Donna Shalala announced in March a new campaign to promote participation in soccer as a healthy alternative to smoking. The campaign was hailed by President Bill Clinton at a White House ceremony. “Young women are bombarded with billboards which suggest that smoking is cool and glamorous and a good way to stay thin,” the President said. “The women of the US national soccer team know better. This spring and summer, they are going to make America proud when they compete in the Olympics. And just when thousands of young girls around the country are looking up to them, they are going to make it clear that smoking is not cool. . . . It will make a real difference in people’s lives.”

The campaign was announced with the airing of a national TV advertisement featuring members of the US women’s national soccer team promoting the benefits of a smoke-free lifestyle. The US campaign is called “Smoke-Free Kids and Soccer” and is a collaboration between HHS, the US women’s national soccer team, and US Soccer, the governing body of American soccer.

In announcing the campaign, Shalala said the objective was to prevent smoking among girls ages 12-17 and to increase awareness of the risk to performance that results from cigarette use. She launched the campaign at a press conference in Atlanta, Georgia, the site of the 1996 Summer Olympics. “More and more young people, especially girls, are striking the first match that will lead to a lifelong, life-threatening addiction,” Shalala said. “This campaign communicates not only the negative effects of tobacco use on athletic performance, but also promotes participation in sports as a positive alternative to smoking.” Shalala added: “[The campaign] is an excellent vehicle for reaching young people with the smoke-free message. Athletics give young people the very benefits they often seek from smoking: independence, status with their peers, a chance to make friends and a positive sense of self.”

The campaign includes a 30-second television advertisement, a 60-second radio advertisement, fact sheets on tobacco and athletic performance, and two motivational posters featuring members of the US women’s team (figures 1a and 1b). The advertisements aired as paid advertising during the Spring and Summer in communities where the national team hosted “friendly” matches against international competitors. The television advertisement has also aired during national broadcasts of US matches, reaching millions of young soccer fans and their families.

Copies of the HHS posters and fact sheets are distributed to young fans attending National Team games and are made available to youth soccer leagues and state health departments. The campaign debut took place during matches in Atlanta and
Charlotte, North Carolina between the US and German National Teams. The US women hosted additional games against The Netherlands, France, China, Japan, and Canada in preparation for the Olympics. US National Team co-captains Julie Foudy and Carla Overbeck attended the White House ceremony and met President Clinton. Along with their team-mates, they have agreed to bring the “Smoke-Free Message” to millions of their fans. They are committed to encouraging more girls to take up soccer and put down cigarettes.

In explaining the importance of the smoke-free campaign Ms Foudy said: “It has been an unbelievable opportunity for us. We have a chance to make a difference in a child’s life—healthy, smoking is either life or death: that is why this campaign is so crucial.” Ms Foudy, who attends Stanford Medical School, challenged parents, teachers, and coaches to join the “Smoke-Free Kids and Soccer” campaign and “to set an example for these kids and show them what a smoke-free life is all about.” Foudy added, “It is a lifestyle to be learned when you are young and a lifestyle that will buy you years of healthy living.”

Foudy, 25, an internationally recognised professional, summed up the attitude of the fiercely competitive US players: “We’d much rather smoke a defender than a cigarette. Just watch us in July.”

HHS public health officials said women’s soccer was selected to highlight the smoke-free campaign because of the game’s growing popularity among young girls. More than 7 million US women currently play soccer. Among children under 12, soccer ranks second in popularity only to basketball. The rapid growth of soccer and its popularity among youth suggests a bright future for the sport and its role in promoting a smoke-free lifestyle among youth.

Women’s soccer is also growing in popularity around the globe. In 1995 Sweden hosted the second Women’s World Cup, which was won by Norway. In 1996 women’s soccer had its debut as a medal event at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic games. In 1998 the third Women’s World Cup is expected to be hosted by the US.

**Blood on the chair**

In one of the most audacious examples yet seen of the tobacco industry buying the respectability which its core operations so utterly deny it, BAT Industries has found that even one of the world’s most famous universities has a price. Few would have suspected that Cambridge, one of Britain’s most ancient and revered seats of learning, would sell its soul for a comparatively paltry £1.6 million (US$2.4 million). But in March, the university issued a press release which began: “As part of its commitment to education,” which might have been expected to continue something like: “Cambridge University is pleased to announce...”. In fact, it continued: “BAT Industries is to allow a Professorship of International Relations at Cambridge in honour of Sir Patrick Sheehy, who retired as Chairman of BAT Industries at the end of December”. The ologinuous text, which looked as if it had been drafted by BAT’s public affairs department, went on to describe the “Sir Patrick Sheehy Professorship” and related scholarships carrying BAT’s name, complete with unctuous quotes and information about Sir Patrick. The head of the university’s medical school interrupted a world lecture tour as soon as he heard the news, and returned to Cambridge for some plain talking with the vice-chancellor and other members of staff. Letters of protest poured in from former students and others outraged that the university was to contaminate itself not only by taking BAT’s money, but by lending its lustre to a man whose most obvious commitment to international relations had been the deliberate expansion of tobacco sales in developing countries, often by the most aggressive marketing strategies. As it was put by Sir Richard Doll, the renowned epidemiologist who was one of the first to firmly establish the link between smoking and serious diseases such as lung cancer, “Sir Patrick’s contribution to society...has been to cause a great deal of disease.”

Apparently overlooking the certainty implied in the press release (one wonders whether BAT pushed the university press office into issuing it, assuming there would be fierce opposition), the vice-chancellor backtracked to explain that the decision was not final, and that academic staff could in due course press the matter to a vote. The university duly acceded to a vote of senior academic staff in July, strongly recommending acceptance and got its way by 1128 votes to 583. In addition to angry accusations of “blood money” from those who voted against it, the outcome drew an announcement from the Cancer Research Campaign, one of the UK’s largest cancer charities, that it would consider withholding future research funding from the University.

The man on whom Cambridge will bestow such a substantial honour seems unlikely to add to the university’s academic prestige, if his grasp of science is anything to go by. In 1990, he told a British newspaper: “BAT’s policy is very clear. Our view is that smoking has not been established to be the cause of disease”. Nor are his special contributions to BAT likely to give students of moral philosophy any special reason for celebration. His earnings in 1992, before he began to scale down his work, were reported to be just under a million pounds (US$1.5 million), of which over a third was performance related. In that year, “Commercial activities” (of which over 90% was tobacco) were up by more than a quarter over the previous year, and accounted for two-thirds of the group’s profits. Thus much of the performance that earned Sir Patrick his extra pay related to increased tobacco sales. In his Chairman’s statement to shareholders, he outlined the three key elements of strategy that had made the group’s tobacco trading so successful: improving the share of existing markets; increasing exports; and “actively investing in new markets that are opening up.”

Readers of this journal will be familiar with examples of all these elements of strategy. The last one may be of special interest to students at the Centre for International Studies, where the new Professor will be based. They may want to consider the tactics used by the BAT in its overseas markets, especially those where it believes that public knowledge of the dangers of smoking may be less advanced than in its home country. Some good examples of these tactics were illustrated by the “hit squad” that went to Sri Lanka and South Africa in October 1993, and clearly showed the lengths to which BAT will go to mislead people about the nature of smoking (Tobacco Control 1994;3:76–7). In trying to make Sri Lankans and South Africans believe that smoking was not harmful, Sharon Boyse, head of BAT’s Smoking Issues Department, said that smoking was “simply a ‘risk marker’ for diseases like lung cancer, in the same way that driving licences are risk markers for car accidents”. Exactly the same “driving licence” trick was used earlier.