Editorial

A Safe Cigarette?

There is no doubt that research has firmly linked cigarette smoking with increased morbidity and mortality from a number of diseases—lung cancer, coronary heart disease, cerebral and peripheral occlusive vascular disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and gastrointestinal disorders. Few scientific facts are as firmly established as that of the adverse consequences of smoking cigarettes.

Yet cigarette production and consumption in the United States are at an all-time high. As of June 1977, an estimated 48 million adults and six million children were purchasing 626 billion cigarettes annually. Almost two-thirds of the adult population do not smoke, but more cigarettes are being consumed by those who do smoke.

While still denying any link between cigarette smoking and health hazards, the tobacco industry is moving swiftly to meet consumer demand for cigarettes with “low” tar and nicotine. Today, about 25 percent of all cigarette sales are in this category (15 mg. of tar or less), and the numbers are growing steadily. These cigarettes seem more profitable for the producer and may be slightly less hazardous. But low tar-nicotine cigarettes are not without significant danger.

The tobacco industry’s own supported research, reported by the American Medical Association, the reports of the National Cancer Institute and the National Heart and Lung Institute, together with epide-miological studies of the American Cancer Society, unquestionably prove the hazards of high tar and nicotine cigarettes.

While there is evidence that cigarettes with lower tar and nicotine may be slightly less toxic, an American Cancer Society study over a 12-year period in a population of more than one million men and women showed that the death rates for lung cancer and coronary heart disease in people smoking lower tar and nicotine cigarettes (less than 17.6 mg. tar and 1.2 mg. nicotine) far exceeded the rates for those who had never smoked. Reduced tar and nicotine is but a very small step toward minimizing the risk of a serious health problem.

And cigarette smoking affects the nonsmoker as well. There is an increasing effort nationwide to limit the public areas in which cigarette smoking is permitted. Both mainstream and sidestream sources of smoke are atmospheric pollutants that cause simple discomfort to many nonsmokers and when ventilation is poor may represent a serious threat to others who are particularly sensitive.

A less well known hazard of smoking is the effect on the fetus of the pregnant woman. The mother-to-be who smokes doubles her risk of delivering a still-born child, and the newborn generally weighs less than those of non-smoking mothers. Maternal smoking during pregnancy is also associated with an increase in late fetal and neonatal death rates.
Physicians, other health professionals and institutions can serve the public well as educators and exemplars in changing cigarette smoking habits. Yet not enough of the nation's hospitals are actively engaged in anti-smoking efforts. Physicians do not do enough to educate patients about the dangers of smoking or to give them practical information about quitting. In fact, most cigarette smokers report that they have never been advised by a physician to stop smoking. The entire health community can promote a positive lifestyle to the public, by giving information and guidance about the risks of smoking and by referring smokers to cessation programs.

Since 1964, more than 30 million Americans have quit smoking. Adult cigarette smokers have decreased from 42 percent in 1964 to 34 percent in 1978. The American Cancer Society advises abstinence from cigarettes and conducts its education and cessation programs to this end. The American Cancer Society also encourages reduction of toxic ingredients in cigarettes to lessen the hazard for those who are unable to quit.

Low tar-nicotine cigarettes may undo their slight potential benefit if they encourage people, especially the young who have never smoked, to begin smoking or if in their production, manufacturers have added new, untested ingredients that ultimately prove harmful.

Reduction of tar and nicotine content has not converted cigarette smoking into a habit worth recommending. If anything, we have paid too little attention to reports that suggest cigarette smoking may be a true addiction rather than a psychological habituation.

Despite the misinterpretations of recent publications and reports, there is no proven safe cigarette!

Arthur I. Holleb, Jr., D.