Cigarette Smoking Among Physicians and Other Health Professionals, 1959-1972

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The subject of smoking among physicians and other health professionals has been of special interest as the evidence that cigarette smoking is a major health threat continues to mount. A 1967 report based on questionnaire replies from over 5,000 physicians in 25 states indicated that 29 percent were still smoking cigarettes in 1965, a decrease of 10 percent from those currently smoking cigarettes in 1959.\(^1\) Results from another questionnaire completed in 1972 indicated that only 19.5 percent of physicians were still smoking cigarettes as of that time.

These data were obtained from the American Cancer Society's long-range follow-up epidemiologic study, in which one million men and women over 30 years old and from 25 states were enrolled by American Cancer Society volunteers in the Fall of 1959 and asked to complete detailed questionnaires about themselves. The results of this study have been described elsewhere.\(^2\)\(^3\)\(^4\) Among those enrolled were 5,604 physicians, 5,407 males and 197 females.

At the start of the study in 1959, 65.7 percent of the male physicians reported that they had smoked cigarettes at some time and 39.5 percent were still smokers. The subjects were asked to complete short supplemental questionnaires on four occasions after the original enrollment: in 1961, 1963, 1965 and 1972. They supplied additional information, including details of their current cigarette smoking habit.

During the course of the 13-year follow-up study, 18 percent of the physicians died. In 1972, 2,899 answered the questionnaire and reported on their smoking behavior; 2,426 had answered all four supplemental questionnaires. Among those who answered all questionnaires, the percentage of cigarette smokers had dropped from 38.6 percent in 1959 to 37.7 percent in 1961, to 31.8 percent in 1963, to 28.3 percent in 1965 and to 19.5 percent in 1972.

Of those who were current smokers in 1959, 41.4 percent had given up all forms of smoking by 1972, 13.8 percent switched to pipes or cigars and 44.8 percent were still smoking cigarettes.

Light smokers were able to give up cigarettes more easily than heavy smokers: 75.3 percent of those smoking less than one-half pack a day in 1959 quit by 1972; 61.7 percent of the one-half to one pack a day smokers, 51.1 percent of the one to two pack a day smokers and only 38.0 percent of the two or more pack a day smokers quit cigarettes in 1972.

The vast majority of those who re-
ported that they had quit in 1959 were still not smoking cigarettes, but 3.2 percent of the ex-cigarette smokers in 1959 were back on cigarettes in 1972.

"Current" cigarette smoking habits at any point of time are considered a combination of several factors: some smokers increase the number of cigarettes smoked daily, some give it up entirely or cut down; to some extent this is influenced by selective mortality—cigarette smokers die off faster than non-smokers.

Less than half of the physicians in each amount per day category were still smoking at the same level in 1972. For example, 68 percent of the one-half to one pack a day smokers in 1959 had cut out or cut down on smoking in 1965; 20 percent were still smoking the same number of cigarettes per day, and 12 percent had increased the number smoked per day.

Since fewer women physicians smoked than males in 1959, they are being reported separately. However, they were not as successful as men in their efforts to quit smoking: 34.4 percent of the 197 women physicians were smoking cigarettes in 1959 and 23.7 percent of them were still smoking in 1972.

An analysis was also made of the changes in smoking habits of two other health professional groups, dentists and nurses. Of the 1,234 male dentists who answered all five questionnaires, 40.4 percent were smoking cigarettes in 1959 and 21.7 percent were smoking in 1972. This pattern paralleled the trend in physicians, illustrated in the Figure.

A total of 9,498 female nurses answered all five questionnaires. They, too, showed a decline in the percentage of current cigarette smokers: 36.3 percent were cigarette smokers in 1959, and 25.9 percent were still smoking in 1972. Nurses (and women physicians) seemed to find it more difficult to quit.
In males, the lowest percentage of cigarette smokers is in the college graduate group and the highest is in those with some high school education. In females, the differences by educational groups tended to be much less pronounced. In 1972, 25.9 percent of the female nurses smoked, as opposed to 19.5 percent of all women in the study. The nurses tended to be slightly younger than the rest of the women, but even adjusted for age, nurses smoked at a greater rate than other women.

This long-term study has an advantage over cross-sectional studies in that changes in smoking habits of the same group of persons, a cohort, have been observed over a period of time. Different results might have been found if different groups of physicians were surveyed in two different periods. The youngest of the physicians in our study would have been 43 years old in 1972, and the great majority were 58 years of age or older. Thus, this report is based on a relatively older physician population in 1972. However, other studies have shown that younger physicians, those who received their training after the mid-1950's, when the first reports linking smoking and health appeared, tend to smoke less than those who are older.

When we last reported our results in 1967, it appeared that most physicians who were going to quit had already made that decision, and it was uncertain whether the percent of cigarette smokers would continue to decrease. In the Fall of 1965, when the physicians reported on their smoking habits, the impact of the Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health was still strong. Many who up to that time had still been unconvinced by the medical evidence were persuaded to quit. This new report shows that 19.5 percent of physicians still smoke, a decrease of 19.1 percent since 1959 and 8.8 percent since 1965.

Physicians play an important role in convincing their patients not to smoke. They can best persuade their patients if they themselves do not smoke.

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