College lectures

Tobacco: the third world war
Advice from General Sun Tzu

The Lilly Lecture 1996

The objectives of the war against tobacco are similar to those of most wars. They are to:

- protect countries from being invaded and overpowered
- save people from being killed
- return land to growing food
- improve the economy
- protect the environment.

The Third World tobacco war will be longer than the Hundred Years War. It has already exacted staggering casualties, and will exact far more casualties than the previous two world wars. The health army has lost the first stage of the war, as the battleground has merely been transferred from the rich to the poor countries. In the second stage of the war, tobacco deaths will rise from the present annual global toll of three million to over 10 million by the year 2025, with most (seven million) of these deaths in the Third World [1]. This is a military disaster.

Health professionals might well study Sun Tzu’s Art of War [2], written in the 6th century BC. It has long been regarded as a classic work on military strategy, tactics, logistics and espionage, and has great relevance to the current war against tobacco. The Art of War remains full of sound, relevant thinking and instruction on traditional combat and warfare.

It is remarkable that the health army, hopelessly outnumbered, lacking funds and equipment, has won any battles. We may take heart from Sun Tzu’s belief that victory will eventually be achieved for a ‘just and noble’ cause. He believed that it is of vital importance that the art of war should be studied with great care in order to achieve victory.

Learn from history

One relevant historical battle worth studying is the Opium War, fought against China in the last century. Here, too, was a product recognised to be addictive, one that western nations were trying to eradicate among their own people, yet a product they were foisting on a Third World nation.

Today we witness a re-run of history; even the words used are the same. The lawyers for the opium interests attempted to:

‘expose the mischievous fallacies disseminated by the Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade,…’

and said:

‘Smoking is perfectly innocuous. It is on a par with tea drinking. The alleged effects of opium have been vastly exaggerated. The use of opium is not a curse but a comfort to the hard-working Chinese’ [3].

The Encyclopaedia Sinica of 1917 noted that foreign merchants in China had made large fortunes from opium:

‘the fact being that the trade is profitable to a very few merchants only’ [3].

Viscount Palmerston was right when he said:

‘It is entirely beyond the power of the Chinese Government to prevent the introduction of opium into China’ [3].

Opium was introduced, and it took decades to stop the trade. He could equally well have been talking about tobacco.

Know thine enemy

One confusion in the tobacco war is the difficulty of determining who is the enemy. Yet how can we fight with clear vision unless we determine this simple fact?

Are smokers the enemy?

Some contend that smokers are the enemy; they are selfish, belligerent people whose habit harms others, burns down buildings and forests, and pollutes the environment with matches, discarded packets and cigarette butts. I do not subscribe to this view. Smokers are merely the foot-soldiers and the casualties of this war. They start smoking in youth, then get locked into a dangerous, addictive and expensive habit that most would prefer to quit—reluctant soldiers indeed. They are the cannon fodder and require our sympathy.

Is the tobacco industry the enemy?

The answer is easy: ‘Yes’—but parts of the tobacco industry are more formidable than others. The commercial,

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transnational tobacco companies are more formidable than the government tobacco monopolies (e.g., China, Laos and Vietnam) and behave differently.

- The commercial tobacco companies deny the health evidence, while the monopolies admit such evidence.
- The commercial companies advertise, sponsor and promote their product in myriad ways; the monopolies rarely, if ever, advertise.
- The monopolies comply with their own government regulations and laws, whereas the commercial companies challenge and obstruct those laws, even taking governments to court to prevent tobacco control legislation.
- There is a limited window of opportunity to negotiate a truce with some tobacco monopolies; no such opportunity exists with the commercial companies, and none has existed for decades.

Some government tobacco monopolies remain unaware that they themselves are under siege, or that they will not be able to compete with the better equipped transnational army with their ‘Trojan horse’ tactics of expensive and seductive advertising. Inevitably, the monopolies decline, starved of supplies, or are simply bought wholesale by the victorious conquerors.

Are governments the enemy?

Governments should be on our side, but often they are not. Some health advocates complain that most of their energy is used fighting their own government rather than the tobacco industry. Some governments have not mobilised or taken even remotely appropriate action, although they have seen the casualties piling up decade after decade. Governments sometimes support the opposing army, for example, the US and British embassies assist their tobacco companies in overseas markets [4,5]. The European Union spends about 1,000 million ECU (£800 million, US$1,240 million) a year subsidising tobacco production but only 1.55 million ECU (£1.2 million, US$1.85 million) on smoking prevention [6]. Some politicians and governments receive substantial payments from the tobacco companies. In Asia, one president’s family owns tobacco and allied companies. Two British ex-prime ministers have promoted tobacco interests [7,8].

Governments often focus on the ‘benefits’ of tobacco tax revenue, or are concerned about employment of tobacco farmers and workers, which sometimes prevents them from taking appropriate tobacco control action. It is vitally important for them to realise that tobacco always brings a considerable debit to their economy, and that millions of smokers lose their jobs each year because they die from their habit.

Some governments still do not realise that they are in a tobacco war. They may be fighting on a different battlefield—combating malaria, tuberculosis or infant mortality. The pro-tobacco battalions have crept up on them unawares. Others may realise they are in a tobacco war, but lack the know-how and weapons to fight this new type of conflict.

Are the media the enemy?

The media should be on our side, but sometimes they are not. Backers of the opposing army can buy whole media networks, and have used the mass media very effectively to promote smoking. Research from the USA dating back to the 1930s provides solid evidence that media acceptance of revenue from cigarette advertising has repeatedly led to the non-reporting of smoking and health matters to the extent the problem warrants [9].

This suppression of health information on smoking is of special concern in the Third World where public knowledge about the effects of smoking may be minimal, even non-existent. It means that large numbers of people will be left uninformed on the dangers of smoking, which is particularly important because research indicates that health and cost are the two main reasons given by ex-smokers for quitting.

The media are potential (and in some cases, actual) allies, but medical curricula do not include training in media advocacy and few doctors know how to use the media.

Is the medical profession the enemy?

Doctors should be on our side, but often they are not. Rarely do they fight against us, but they are often apathetic and reluctant to get into battle, even as support troops. Many doctors still use enemy products (57% of male doctors in China are smokers [10], compared with only 6% in the UK [11]), setting a deplorable example both to patients and to the community in general. The vast majority of doctors work in curative care; few systematically identify patients who smoke and offer advice on quitting the habit.

Most funding agencies earmark funds for laboratory or clinical research, not for prevention campaigns. Health societies may state that they support tobacco control, but few supply funds and personnel, and most retreat from public battle with the tobacco industry. Some medical and health societies, universities and individual doctors even invest their funds (e.g. pension funds) in tobacco companies, thereby giving financial support to the enemy’s budget.

Few medical conferences provide keynote or plenary slots for tobacco, even in relevant disciplines; many conferences have no explicit smoke-free policy. In this respect, the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) sets a good example.

Medical curricula include the anterior relations of the ulnar nerve, and the Krebs cycle, yet rarely systematically include information on smoking. A recent
study showed that most medical students are unaware a war is in progress, do not know what it is about, are ignorant of their responsibilities for enlisting, and have no idea how to get into the combat zone [12]. The curricula should include not only information on the dangers of smoking but also how to win the war, how to give advice on quitting, the importance of legislation, and how to counter the tactics and propaganda of the tobacco companies, in particular their so-called 'freedom arguments'.

The hidden enemy

Perhaps the real enemy is apathy on the part of people and organisations who have the knowledge and power to effect change, yet do little. Dante said:

The hottest fires in hell are reserved for those who, at the moment of moral crisis, maintain neutrality.

The outcome of war

Sun Tzu believed that the outcome of a war can be forecast from the answers to the following four questions:

1. Which party has the stronger moral cause?

There is no doubt that reducing unnecessary deaths from tobacco is the stronger moral position.

2. Which party has the advantage of climate and terrain?

The climate of the social acceptability of smoking as well as public attitudes towards the tobacco industry are changing.

3. Which party has the better general?

The generals in the tobacco industry are far more powerful, financially and politically, but are they 'better'? In my opinion, the opposing army attracts generals of increasingly poor quality. Who would now wish to join an army with such a tarnished reputation? Even their recruitment posters would be considered misleading under any Trade Descriptions Act. They attract huge numbers of foot-soldiers with promises of health, wealth, sex and sophistication. In reality, most of these foot-soldiers end up dying for the cause.

Our army has neither a commander-in-chief nor central command headquarters. The antismoking forces started 40 years ago with a few visionaries (Sir Richard Doll, Professor Charles Fletcher, Sir John Crofton in the UK; Dr Alton Ochsner, Dr Daniel Horn in the USA), who brought in powerful allies such as the RCP and inspired like-minded visionaries all over the world. Although that small force has become larger, it still remains a visionary force rather than a disciplined army.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) co-ordinates some of the government effort, publishes guidelines, advises, reports on the battle, and even gives out annual war medals—but there are only one or two persons at headquarters, no staff working full time in its regional centres, and a negligible budget.

4. Which party has the superior army?

The tobacco industry has the larger paid army, the better trained troops, and commando forces ready to fly anywhere in the world to put down local threats to their empire. They have money to buy influence from governments, sports and arts organisations, and even universities.

The health army has no hierarchical structure and must be one of the most disorganised armies on earth. It mainly consists of disparate pockets of inspired volunteer guerillas chivvying (and sometimes harassing) governments into action. There is usually no well thought-out strategic battle plan, especially in Third World countries, and some groups are not in contact with any other troops.

The health army has a tiny core—in the whole of Asia there are less than ten full-time soldiers. The 'greater army' could be large, and include:

- the medical profession
- epidemiologists and other scientists
- consumers
- women
- youth and environment organisations
- teachers
- labour unions.

But many people are simply not interested in going into battle.

The legal profession has recently entered the western front with heavy artillery. In the USA, 60 law firms nationwide are each putting up US$100,000 a year to take part in class action litigation against the five largest tobacco companies [13]. The 1996 Liggett settlement is the first in which a tobacco company agreed to a financial settlement, conceded that nicotine was addictive, and agreed both to fund stop-smoking programmes and to stop using cartoon characters to promote its product. In addition, Liggett reached a settlement with five state governments seeking reimbursement for state Medicaid spending on smoking-related diseases. This can be hailed as the equivalent of El Alamein, a crucial turning point in World War II.

Some war manuals give strategic direction, for example the RCP reports [14-18] and Guidelines for smoking control by the International Union Against Cancer (published in 1980) [19]. The WHO will be publishing guidelines in 1996 on the battlefields and necessary action [20]. Hundreds of books and tens of thousands of reports have been written about this war, and now there is a journal, Tobacco Control, which reports progress from all over the world. Every few
years, the battle-weary meet at world conferences on tobacco or health to discuss the overall progress of the war.

What would Sun Tzu have made of such disarray? The structure certainly would not have fitted in with his hierarchical and disciplined concept of army structure, but he would have to admit that this straggling army, for all its inadequacies, has achieved considerable success. Surprisingly, the opposing side appears to view the health army as a dangerous and formidable force. Leaked documents from the tobacco industry describe the health army as sophisticated, on global electronic alert for instantaneous response to challenge, outnumbering and outmanoeuvring the tobacco companies at every turn. The WHO is described in awed tones. I found this so astonishing that for a moment I wondered if the leak could be a hoax. Perhaps we are better organised than we realise?

**Battle strategies and tactics**

Sun Tzu emphasised the importance of a thorough knowledge of the enemy. He said that:

- through spies, the enemy’s plans and plots can be ascertained
- through provocation, their mood and movements
- by tactics, their strengths and weaknesses
- by contact, the differences between the two opposing forces.

Sun Tzu’s five-point summary of planning a battle parallels a modern-day funding proposal for a tobacco control project:

1. Measure the distances
2. Evaluate the forces
3. Estimate the expenses
4. Assess the possibilities
5. Plan for victory.

The General believed that careful planning would lead to success, and careless planning to defeat—and ‘how much more certain is defeat if there is no planning at all.’

Yet often the outnumbered health army can do no more than react to invasion or to the more outrageous consequences of war. Rarely, especially in developing countries, can it plan a comprehensive strategy.

**The five ways to victory**

Sun Tzu said that there are five ways to victory:

1. To know when to fight and when not to fight. My own dictum is never to fight a personal attack. Dignity and strength may be gained from only fighting the issue.

We can rely on the ferocity of fighting by the opposing army to indicate which battles to fight. In practice, the tobacco industry concentrates its fight on two main issues:

- bans on tobacco promotion
- tobacco tax increases.

This is a good indication that our forces should be concentrated on these two battles. The tobacco companies never oppose bans on sales to minors—a good litmus test that this is a relatively ineffective measure, especially in developing countries where cigarettes are sold by street vendors, often no more than children themselves.

Sun Tzu paid particular attention to the advantages of choosing terrain for a fight. The tobacco industry likes to rouse its army with clarion calls about free trade and employment, so-called ‘freedom’ issues and environmental tobacco smoke (their euphemism for passive smoking, on which they believe the scientific evidence of harm is weaker than for first-hand smoking). It tries to avoid fighting on the health terrain—a good indication that we must keep the health issues alive.

2. To know how to match a small force against a large one. Sun Tzu says it is a great advantage to be able to outwit the enemy by clever manoeuvring, for it is dangerous for a small army to have to face the full combat strength of a large army.

3. To have the whole-hearted support of all the men. The men and women of the tobacco control army are an extremely dedicated group of people; there are just not many of them.

4. To seize every possible advantage or opportunity. Opportunities can present unexpectedly [21,22]:

- a new data report
- a politician whose brother has just been killed by smoking
- news events of the day, such as comparing the annual three million tobacco deaths with the much smaller number of heroin deaths, boxing fatalities or deaths in air crashes.

5. To be able to lead and command without interference from the sovereign. This can be a problem for some government-funded tobacco control organisations such as the European Bureau for Action on Smoking Prevention, funded by the European Commission and closed down in 1995.

**Spies**

Sun Tzu states that information on enemy tactics cannot be obtained by offering prayers to the gods and spirits, but only from those who have a thorough knowledge of enemy conditions—that is, spies. He adds that none should be more favourably regarded, liberally rewarded and clothed in secrecy, than spies.

An increasing number of tobacco industry executives contact me with inside information on their own companies. The information provided has often led to government action. For example, after receiving a
tip-off from someone inside the industry that smokeless tobacco was about to be introduced into the territory, the Hong Kong government performed a pre-emptive strike and banned manufacture, importation and sale of smokeless tobacco in 1987. I regret that I cannot divulge a more recent example, but there are several already in 1996.

A demoralised army under siege

Sun Tzu noted that in the early stages of battle the fighting spirit is strong, but later it tends to flag. This burn-out is evident in the tobacco control movement, with few warriors there. Sun Tzu noted, 'with few warriors there can be no victory'. However, many tobacco companies are growing weary of the fight to the bitter end. Most grow weary of the USA, and do not have the stamina to sustain a long siege. The USA, like many other countries, has a long siege. When the USA's long siege is broken, the tobacco companies are left with a defeated army, and the tobacco companies are not sure whether they will be able to make a comeback.

In 1988, a study by the Health Department of Western Australia reported that the tobacco industry was a poor last in the public rated their statements, with 74.5% finding their statements 'not at all believable' [24].

In the USA, the only interest group to be given an overall unfavourable rating in the 1989 Gallup poll was the Tobacco Institute, which attracted negative opinions from every region and socio-economic group [25]. In 1994, a New York Times/CBS News poll showed that an overwhelming majority of Americans, smokers and non-smokers, believed the tobacco companies do not tell the whole truth in acknowledging the health risks of smoking [26]. Comic strips, such as Doonesbury, regularly ridicule the tobacco industry.

In 1994, The Independent on Sunday [27] interviewed tobacco workers, asking them how it felt to: 'have evolved, in your working lifetime, into what some people consider to be a kind of drug dealer? Do you feel beleaguered? Do you sleep at night?' Many of these workers avoided telling other people the exact nature of their job. One young executive answered mournfully 'At dinner parties, people compare me to a Nazi'. The most brazen response was 'Sure, I'm a drug dealer—but do you know how much I make?'

On plane journeys, I find people move perceptibly away from me when I say 'I work in tobacco'. Some even regard me with overt hostility. It is only when I go on to say 'Of course against, not for, tobacco' that their entire body language changes, they relax and become friendly.

Sun Tzu says that an entire army may become demoralised and men exhausted with a long siege. Tobacco executives are in for a lifelong siege. When laying siege, Sun Tzu advocates leaving the opposition a way of retreat, and cautions against driving a defeated enemy to desperation. He says it is a proven fact that:

- if attacked, soldiers will defend themselves
- if hard pressed, they will fight
- if desperate, they will do anything.

The behaviour and increasing belligerence of the tobacco companies and their apologists indicate that they are becoming desperate, suing, threatening and attacking governments, health organisations and individuals [28]. Along with other tobacco control advocates, I have received death threats [29], and have personally been accused of being 'sanctimonious, dogmatic, pontificating, meddlesome, heretic, puritanical, hysterical, prejudiced, coercive, vehement'. I have even been accused of having 'subliminal, repressed, sexual frustration' because I cannot bear to see the position of a cigarette in relation to the male mouth!' A desperate army indeed.

Conclusion

There have been successes in this tobacco war:

- increasing awareness of the health risks
- decreasing social acceptability of smoking
- implementation of control measures
- reduction of prevalence and
- in a few places where the battle has been a long siege, reduction of disease and death.

However, vast areas of the world remain where these battles are still to be fought, and the populations liberated from the occupying forces and the bondage of nicotine addiction. It is remarkable that the health army has won any battles, given its shortcomings in finance and organisation. I like to think that our successes are because we have truth on our side or, as Sun Tzu would say, a just and noble cause.

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