

There are Still Reasons to keep Tobacco in the News!

by Olivia Wackowski, MPH

As professionals in the fields of public health and tobacco control, we may often feel frustrated at the lack of publicity and media coverage that the tobacco epidemic receives. Considering that tobacco is the primary cause of death in the United States, it definitely still does not get its fair share of press. I certainly don't hear about how many people died in New York from tobacco caused diseases on the evening news after I hear about how many people were murdered that day. I mean, how many people in the general public really even know that tobacco is the number one cause of death in the US? I know I didn't know that fact until I started working on my degree in public health. How many people in the general public really know that tobacco kills more people every year than drugs, alcohol, motor vehicle accidents, and HIV *combined*? Doesn't that seem like *news*? We definitely know that thus far tobacco destroys lives far greater than bioterrorism does, another public health issue seemingly covered far more in the press. So, what's the deal?

In January 2004, I attended a one day conference entitled: "Beyond Breakthroughs: the Press and the Public Health Profession." In the afternoon, a panel assembled of both public health professionals (including our very own TDP Director) and journalists that cover health issues. This panel clearly illustrated the different points of views and objectives of these two fields. To put it very simply, public health professionals may feel that their research, findings, etc. should be communicated to the public because they are inherently important and can benefit the public at large, while journalists are primarily concerned with keeping their audience interested in buying newspapers, watching their program, etc., and thus select articles/issues that are not only important, but that will better attract reader/viewer-ship and profits. Thus, it seems that while the field of tobacco control has made great progress in research and treatment, we still struggle with getting our resulting messages out to the public. In order to be heard, we have to not only consider *our* opinions of the importance of our news, but we must also consider whether our message will be thought of as "newsworthy" by those who will be responsible for relaying it to the public, where issues that bare unusualness, timeliness, controversy, questions of blame, etc. are more likely to be covered in the media.

Then there's also the issue of risk perception. The public's perception of risk from a particular hazard can be influenced by the number of "outrage factors" associated with it. For example, a hazard will be considered more risky if it is somehow exotic or unusual, if it is controlled by others, if it is involuntary, if it comes from an untrusted source, if it is of little or no benefit, and if it affects children. On the other hand, a risk may be considered more "acceptable" (and simultaneously less newsworthy) if the hazard is under voluntary control, has benefits, is natural, is from a trusted source, and is familiar. We can see how tobacco loses coverage because it has become a "familiar" risk and because smoking is perceived to be under "voluntary" control. Yet, most of the

previously mentioned "unacceptable" risks that are more likely to cause outrage *are* in fact associated with smoking – it certainly comes from an untrusted source, affects children, and in terms of nicotine dependence, can actually be considered involuntary. It is up to us, then, to remember and continue to highlight the reasons that make smoking an *outrageous* risk to our health, and to work to keep this important public health issue alive and well in the media.

Source: Information used in this article was referenced from Health/Risk Communication, a course taught by Dr. Jane Lewis at the UMDNJ School of Public Health.

CHAMPION VS. TOBACCO

MATTHEW MYERS

by Patricia Repetto, MEd



As we recognize the accomplishments in tobacco control over the last 40 years, it brings us great pleasure to name Matthew Myers as this edition's Champion. Mr. Myers is the current president and chief legal counsel of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids (the Campaign), and has been a devoted tobacco control advocate for over a

decade. His efforts have focused largely on legislative advocacy against the tobacco industry. Mr. Myers' accomplishments at the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids have consisted of overseeing all of its advocacy, outreach, and grassroots development efforts and focusing the nation's attention on reducing tobacco use among children. The Campaign has been a frequent provider of technical assistance to New Jersey tobacco control advocates, and, in 2002, Mr. Myers attended and spoke forcefully at a successful press conference at the New Jersey Statehouse advocating for proper funding for tobacco control in New Jersey. Not long after that press conference, a budget was passed that included stable funding (at \$30 million) for New Jersey's Comprehensive Tobacco Control Program, a 70 cent per pack increase in cigarette tax, and the promise of a progressive increase in CTCF funding to reach \$45 million per year in 2005 (though, unfortunately, Governor McGreevey subsequently cut that funding to \$10 million in 2003).

Mr. Myers has been recognized by some of this country's top leaders in public health for his efforts. These awards include the 1996 Smokefree America Award as the lawyer who had made the greatest contribution to tobacco-control efforts in the United States, as well as the 1989 prestigious Surgeon General's Medallion from Dr. C. Everett Koop for contributions to the public health of the nation. His many efforts are featured in *The Giant Killers*, written by Michael Pertschuk, former chairman of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). Furthermore, Mr. Myers is published widely in health and medical publications, and appears regularly on national news programs to discuss tobacco issues. Finally, the Tobacco Dependence Program is proud to present Matt Myers as one of our distinguished guest speakers at our Annual Conference in May, as Mr. Myers has proven himself a leader worthy of the title, "Champion Against Tobacco".

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