

# Tobacco Or Health: How Far Has the Industry Come?

by Jonathan Foulds, PhD

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tobacco industry's "Frank Statement" on tobacco and health, and the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landmark 1964 Surgeon General's Report. This article summarizes the context of these major events and asks what they imply about our interpretation of the industry's current behavior.

In the May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1950 edition of the Journal of the American Medical Association, Wynder and Graham published a study which found that almost every patient out of 605 cases of lung cancer was a smoker, whereas lung cancer was an exceptionally rare occurrence in non-smokers. A couple of months later (September, 1950), Doll and Hill reported in the British Medical Journal that they had found a similar pattern in their study of 709 lung cancer patients in the UK. In 1953, Doll reported on further work examining the relationship between smoking and lung cancer. He wrote, "The results amount, I believe, to proof that smoking is a cause of bronchial carcinoma." That same year, Wynder, Graham and Croninger published an important study which showed that when mice were painted with extract of cigarette tars, they grew tumors on that same location.

## Industry Response: The "Frank Statement"

In 1953, just a few years after the first authoritative publications in the scientific literature on the harmfulness of cigarettes, and weeks after the first publication showing that cigarette tar causes cancer, the major U.S. tobacco manufacturers together hired a public relations firm (Hill and Knowlton Inc.) in order to convince the public that the hazards of smoking had not been definitely proven.

On January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1954, the industry released an advertisement titled "A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers". This advertisement appeared in 448 newspapers in 258 cities, reaching an estimated circulation of 43,245,000, and laid out the industry's opinion of the recent negative health claims. In summary, the advertisement stated,

*"...there is no proof that cigarette smoking is one of the causes...  
...statistics purporting to link cigarette smoking with the disease could apply with equal force to any one of many other aspects of modern life. Indeed the validity of the statistics themselves is questioned by numerous scientists...  
...We accept an interest in people's health as a basic responsibility, paramount to every other consideration in our business...  
...we are establishing a joint industry group consisting initially of the undersigned. This group will be known as TOBACCO INDUSTRY RESEARCH COMMITTEE..."*

Thus, fifty years ago this year, the tobacco companies started working together as one industry to combat the concerns of the public that tobacco may be harmful to their health.

## Medical And Scientific Consensus:

### The 1964 Surgeon General's Report

Medical and scientific consensus on the causal relationship between cigarette smoking and disease took place in the early 1960's. The U.K. Royal College of Physician's Report on Smoking and Health in 1962 and the U.S. Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health in 1964 were landmark publications. Each of these reports carefully weighed up the mass of detailed scientific evidence available to that point on the effects of cigarette smoking on health. In summarizing the results, the

Surgeon General's Report stated that,

*"Expressed in percentage-form, this is equivalent to a statement that for coronary artery disease, the leading cause of death in this country, the death rate is 70% higher for cigarette smokers. For chronic bronchitis and emphysema, which are among the leading causes of severe disability, the death rate for cigarette smokers is 500% higher than for non-smokers. For lung cancer, the most frequent site of cancer in men, the death rate is nearly 1,000 % higher."*

Regarding causation, the 1964 Surgeon General's Report commented,

*"Cigarette smoking is causally related to lung cancer in men; the magnitude of the effect of cigarette smoking far outweighs all other factors...The risk of developing lung cancer increases with duration of smoking and the number of cigarettes smoked per day, and is diminished by discontinuing smoking."*

### The Industry Response to the 1964 Report

Shortly after the 1964 report, and the announcement of proposed legislation to restrict advertising and labeling and to require health warnings on cigarette packs, Bowman Gray, Chairman of the Board of Directors of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, addressed the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce of the U.S. House of Representatives. Speaking on behalf of the tobacco industry, Bowen chose to contest the Commission's findings and flex the industry's massive political and financial muscles as a threat to those who might try to regulate it. His comments included the following:

*"...Many distinguished scientists are of the opinion that it has not been established that smoking causes disease....*

*... it is unnecessary for me to dwell at length before this committee upon the importance of the tobacco industry to the whole nation's economy....*

*...great care should be exercised before any action is taken which could seriously disrupt this important industry..."* - Bowman Gray, Chairman of the Board, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, testifying before the U.S. House of Representatives on behalf of the tobacco industry, 06/25/1964

Until the late 1990's, Philip Morris, R.J. Reynolds and the other major tobacco companies basically stuck to the claim that no evidence existed to prove that smoking causes disease (or that smoking is addictive). By the 1990's, however, the industry had started losing some law-suits, and decided that coming clean on smoking and health might be a more cost-effective strategy. By



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admitting the health consequences of smoking to the public, the companies could then defend themselves from liability in the courts, and could claim that smokers knowingly took the risk of using their products (see Nancy Speelman's review of the Philip Morris web-site).

In a 1972 interview with the Wall Street Journal, Philip Morris vice president James Bowling repeated the company's promise to consumers from two decades earlier that, "...if our product is harmful, we'll stop making it." He repeated the company's position in a 1976 interview when he noted: "*from our standpoint, if anyone ever identified any ingredient in tobacco smoke as being hazardous to human health or being something that shouldn't be there, we could eliminate it. But no one ever has.*"

Mr. Bowling, the Vice President of Philip Morris, was clearly either entirely ignorant of the information being provided by his own scientists some ten years earlier (unlikely), or, he was blatantly lying to the American public (very likely).

It has taken the industry almost 40 years to concede that the conclusions of the 1964 Surgeon General's Report were accurate. I wonder how long it will take them to fulfill their promise of 1954, a promise repeated again in the 1970's, to take seriously the health of their consumers, and to stop selling products that kill people when used as intended. Don't hold your breath.

*For a more detailed account of the tobacco industry's record of lying to the public about the effects of tobacco, contact Jonathan Foulds at: [jonathan.foulds@umdnj.edu](mailto:jonathan.foulds@umdnj.edu)*