

Medical Activism

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How is it that a tobacco conglomerate like R.J.R. Nabisco, whose stock sold for \$48 per share early in 1988, sold in a takeover bid late that same year for \$109 per share? And how could this happen at a time when the U.S. smoking rates have dropped to an all time low? And how could it have occurred despite a \$1 billion corporate loss suffered by R.J.R. Nabisco through the failure of its smokeless "Premier" cigarette? The answer is the limitless profits that are expected from the addiction of billions of people to cigarettes in Third World countries. Many will be Muslims. Many will be from the countries where you were born. Some will be your family members and your friends.

If you examine the history of the efforts against tobacco in this country, it is easy to see that the successes have not come because physicians have been more effective in dealing with cigarette related disease. Nor have they been from the efforts of traditional public health officials. They certainly have not been due to our "enlightened press" which has thrived on income from tobacco advertising. Instead, most of the successes have resulted from the efforts of "activists" (i.e., people who believe strongly, are willing to risk personal gain, and have the creativity to use their limited resources against insurmountable odds).

Activism takes many forms. In a recent article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, we used science as a medium for medical activism.¹ We studied the Surgeon General's warning on tobacco advertisements viewed by teenagers. Using sophisticated eye tracking equipment, we were able to conclusively show that the current warnings are in-

effective. The research question was an important one because:

1. The U.S. government has claimed that it was "doing enough" because it believed it had adequately educated the public through the warnings.
2. Cigarette companies have successfully argued in court that they cannot be held liable for cigarette related illness since they have warned the public.
3. The issue of tobacco advertising bans is raised since the courts have ruled that there must be a balance between advertising and warnings.

It is likely that you will see congressional bills this year that are based on these newly raised issues. The sad fact however, is that we have lived with the warnings for 23 years without anyone ever even questioning their effectiveness.

Where are the medical activists for the Third World? I do not see them when I travel abroad. Perhaps they have all moved to America. Perhaps they own R.J.R. Nabisco stock. The financial experts say that this is a very smart investment - no matter what happens to smoking in America.

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Reference

1. Fischer PM, Richards JW, Berman EJ, Krugman DM. Recall and Eye Tracking Studies of Adolescents Viewing Tobacco Advertisements. *JAMA* 1988; 261:84-89.