We Cough With Forked Tongue

By Larry J. Gordon

What would our federal, state, and local governing bodies do if they knew that a plant was being cultivated from which products were derived that caused illness and death and required inordinate sums of governmental and private funds to be spent in an attempt to prevent morbidity and mortality resulting from their use?

Of course we all know the answer. They would create new preventive programs, fund new treatment facilities, enact rigid laws to prevent the plant's distribution and use, and exact the necessary revenue to support these efforts --- as long as the plant was the poppy and was the agricultural commodity of a foreign country.

But if it was tobacco and was grown, processed, and distributed within the United States, what would our federal, state, and local governing bodies do? Again, we all know the answer. They would take such extreme steps as requiring small warning labels, feebly controlling advertising, and providing a pittance for a national smoking prevention effort, while being extremely careful not to inhibit the growth or distribution of the product or otherwise adversely affect the tobacco growing industry. They would also insure that our citizens were required to share evenly in providing taxes and insurance costs to treat those who chose to use tobacco regardless of feeble warnings and token programs. They would heed the cries of those who proclaim smoking as an inalienable personal liberty despite the fact that every citizen suffers the consequences and pays the costs. They would not consider smoking an environmental problem similar to other environmental pollutants and insults.

When a carcinogen or other harmful pollutant emanates from an industry, regulatory action is taken through EPA, FDA, OSHA, etc. But, while it is known
that tobacco is harmful, the U.S. government continues to provide significantly
greater funding through the Department of Agriculture to protect and promote
the tobacco industry than it does to prevent smoking or protect non-smokers from
this carcinogen.

Those interested in environmental health and other disease prevention
programs have an important stake in supporting President Carter's hospital cost
containment proposal and the cost containment efforts of agencies recently
created by the United States Congress. While we continue to pour increasing
billions into the sickness treatment system, this does little to improve the health
status of our citizens. The escalating costs of sickness treatment are so great that
even minimal funding is not available for prevention, the only program that will
significantly improve the nation's health status. Prevention of smoking is one of
the known and basic efforts which would effectively increase the life span of our
citizens, increase health status, enhance environmental quality, decrease sickness
treatment costs, decrease insurance costs, improve employee productivity, and
upgrade the enjoyment of living.

The factor contributing most to the rise in both the crude and age adjusted
cancer death rates is lung cancer, which alone kills more than 80,000 Americans a
year. The steady increase in lung cancer deaths, mainly in men, is sufficient to raise
the cancer death rates for the entire population. It is estimated that cigarette
smoking in this country is directly responsible for about one-third of all cancers.
Tobacco smoking is an etiological factor for cancers of the lip, tongue, mouth,
larynx, esophagus, lung, stomach, bladder, and pancreas.

As individuals, we can set a nonsmoking example for our families and other
citizens and continue to demand the necessary societal efforts to remedy this
scourge.

The National Environmental Health Association should set an example for our
members, citizens, and legislators by prohibiting smoking in our meeting rooms and
pushing for societal actions necessary to remedy the smoking epidemic. It won't be
easy, quick, or non-controversial, but smoking is an identified and serious
environmental health factor. It really is a matter of life and breath!
And really, can any knowledgeable environmental health professional demand the control of carcinogens and pollutants from other polluting sources while continuing to smoke? The public cannot endure that type of hypocrisy.

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