

Smoking rights under fire

by Leslie Guy

CAUTION: The Surgeon General has determined that cigarette smoking may be hazardous to your health.

This type of phrase has appeared on the packages of all cigarettes since January 1966, when the federal Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act of 1965 took effect mandating the Surgeon General's warning.

Since that time, the Surgeon General's office has issued numerous warnings about the link between smoking and lung cancer and the danger cigarette smoke causes to nonsmokers. In addition, state and federal legislation has been passed requiring no smoking areas in restaurants, and many states have outlawed smoking entirely in schools, government buildings and health facilities.

And a bill is currently in the U.S. House of Representatives which would eliminate advertisements and promotion of tobacco products.

On the other side of the issue, the tobacco companies have won several court cases, on the state level, freeing them from liability to the families of smokers who have died.

Americans are becoming more aware of the dangers of smoking and the move is on to change policies about this potentially deadly habit.

What does the future hold for the tobacco growers, the cigarette industries and the nonsmokers who are concerned for their own health? The answer is unclear, but recent actions by state governments and various businesses indicate that the situation could change.

The American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association have teamed up with the Surgeon General and hope to have a "smoke-free society" by the year 2000.

Lisa Lunsford, district manager of the Cancer Society, says they are focusing their efforts on the preschool students, who will graduate from high school in 2000.

"We have kits and videos that we show in the schools," Lunsford says. "We show them the hazards to prevent them from smoking later."

Although the labels presently on cigarette packages probably have little effect on smokers, other factors discourage people from smoking, Lunsford says.

"People know when they start smoking that it is bad for you," she says. "But smokers are being discouraged because they have no rights. Their habit affects other people, including their families."

A major concern of both associations is the effect of smoke on the passive nonsmoker. The

involuntary smoker (the nonsmoker) breathes less smoke than a smoker, but two percent of the 2,400 lung cancer deaths involved nonsmokers, she says.

As a result of pressure from nonsmokers and the publication of the effects of smoking, 41 states and about 400 municipalities have responded and now limit or restrict smoking in public places, Lunsford says. In Texas, smoking is banned in elevators, public transportation, educational, cultural and health facilities, government work places and U.S. Army buildings, she says.

"I used to work at Fort Hood, and when you have 40,000 soldiers and 30,000 of them smoke, you've got a battle," she says.

In addition, 36 percent of all private employers have some policy about smoking, she says. Hotels, motels and car rental agencies reserve more facilities for nonsmokers.

"Businesses have designated smoking areas and employers are cracking down," she says. "People are quitting because it is not socially acceptable."

Dr. Elvin Smith, a professor of medical physiology at A&M believes the nonsmoking public is now much more aggressive in defense of their rights. He says the risk of heart disease is directly related to the number of cigarettes a person smokes and the amount of smoke a nonsmoker inhales.

"The nonsmoking public is

demanding that its rights be respected," Smith says. "When a nonsmoker is in a room full of smoke, he is forced to breathe it. That smoke increases his risk (of cancer or heart disease), no matter what amount of smoke he breathes."

Therefore, they are urging legislation which would give them freedom from the smoke. Smith is pleased that smoking has been banned in many public places, including public school campuses and airline flights shorter than two hours.

The tobacco industry and growers have seen many changes since the warning label was required. But even if the nonsmokers succeed at outlawing smoking in public places everywhere, there is still no guarantee the tobacco groups will suffer much.

In an effort to control the amount of legislation against smoking, the Tobacco Institute, a trade association representing the tobacco industries, disseminates information representing the companies' points of view and lobbies on federal, state and local levels, and informs industries about current legislation.

Brennan Moran, assistant to the vice president of the Tobacco Institute, says the sales for the industries have not changed during the 1980s so far. They experience a 1 percent drop each year, a minute figure for such a large industry, she says.

"Nothing in the cards indicates dramatic change in the future," Moran

says. "This is a historically strong industry and the future looks as if it will stay the same."

Another obstacle the industries face is the banning of cigarette advertisements and promotions. The effect on the growers and manufacturers is still uncertain.

Moran says the companies' ad campaigns currently focus on convincing smokers to switch brands of cigarettes. The industries are always looking for new brands and new types of cigarettes to appeal to people.

Mike Synar, D-Okla., is promoting a bill to ban all advertisements, sponsorships and promotions by cigarette companies.

Melinda McCracken, a staff assistant to Synar, believes the companies try to attract new smokers.

"They are spending \$2 billion a year to get people to change brands," McCracken says. "That comes out to \$355 per person, which is a lot just to get someone to switch brands. Each company owns many brands, so they aren't trying to get people to change. They are trying to get people to start."

A large majority of people in the United States who smoke start before the age of 17, McCracken says. The companies target their ads for this group, yet in many states it is illegal for people under age 16 to buy cigarettes.

Smith also favors the banning of cigarette advertisements because public tax money is being used to support the tobacco industry.

"The industries write off ads on their tax returns, and the taxpayers subsidize this," Smith says. "I violently object to the ads."

"The tobacco companies have to recruit 2 million new smokers each year to replace those who die or quit, and the only logical place to recruit is the young people," he says.

They deliberately focus their ads on the young people because older people are probably not going to start smoking now, Smith says.

On the other hand, Ronnie L. Woodard, a tobacco farmer from Selma, N.C., opposes banning ads because it will lead to the banning of other freedoms.

"I have a relative in Massachusetts who said all smoking is banned (in his town)," he says. "The only place you can smoke is in your car, home or office, but not in any public place. This will affect the future and I am definitely against it."

Despite a decrease in the number of smokers, Woodard will have one of his largest crops this year, about 52 acres on which he grows 2000-2300 pounds of tobacco per acre.

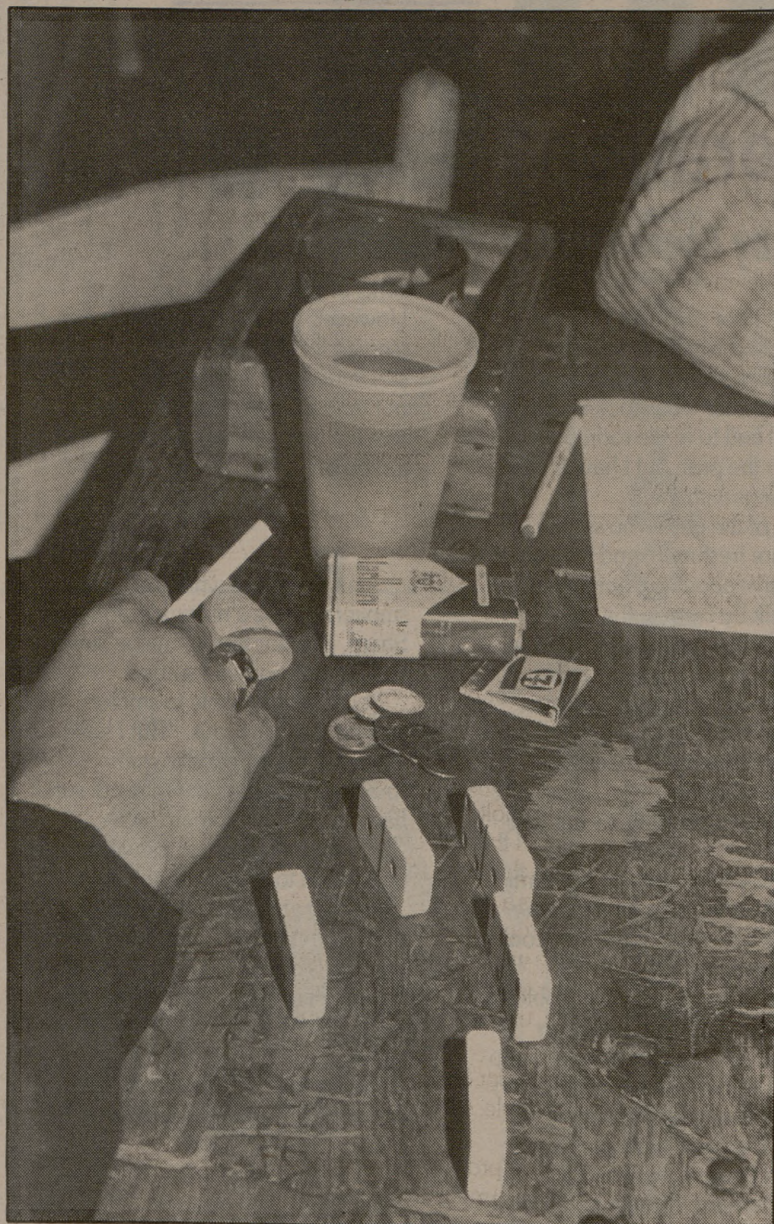
"The companies bought our tobacco strongly all last year," he says. "They had cut our quota for the last few years, and I'm not sure if there was a decrease in demand or an increase in imports. But it is working itself out."

Mark Fleming, a legislative assistant to Senator Jesse Helms, R-N.C., says the senator supports the tobacco farm programs.

"As smoking declines, we must find other markets for the tobacco," Fleming says. "There is a huge market overseas. The demand (for tobacco) in the U.S. has decreased, but the exports have increased a whole lot."

He also opposes the proposed 16¢ tax increase because it "hits the families and people who can least afford it."

"Most smokers have the lower incomes, so the burden is on those



Although smoking is banned in Texas in elevators, vehicles of public transportation, educational, cultural and health facilities, government work places and U.S. Army buildings, smokers still enjoy their cigarettes in a number of public places, such as bars.