

ROE 1987 H (669)

BENEFICIAL ASPECTS OF SMOKING

While the deleterious effects of smoking have been widely discussed and documented, few have commented on the merits of the habit. Here, *Dr Francis Roe*, Consultant in Toxicology and Adviser in Experimental Pathology and Cancer Research, puts forward his views on smoking.

"What is it that is not poison? All things are poison and nothing is without poison. It is the dose only that makes a thing not a poison"

PARACELSUS, 1567

As a physician who has specialised in toxicology and become an adviser to various industries on the safety or otherwise of their products for human use, I view the balance of the benefits and dangers of smoking in a broader context. All chemicals from water to uranium fall within a spectrum that extends from virtually safe to highly hazardous. None are absolutely safe irrespective of exposure levels and none are 100% hazardous irrespective of dose. Some, like oxygen and selenium, are both essential for life and toxic in high dosage so that an intermediate level of exposure has to be aimed at. In the short term smoking is close to the zero end of the spectrum of potential toxicity and even in the long term it nowhere near approaches the toxicity of heavy exposure to asbestos or ionising radiation or the AIDS virus. The commonness of smoking-associated diseases is due much more to the popularity of smoking than to the potency of smoking as a risk factor for toxicity.

Insofar as many people live happy and healthy lives without smoking, it certainly cannot be claimed that smoking offers benefits which people are foolish to miss out on. On the other hand, it is obvious that smoking can give a great deal of pleasure and, perhaps also other benefits which need to be balanced against the well recognised and well publicised health risks. One only has to observe the expressions on the faces of smokers as they light-up after a period of strain or effort to see the relief, the relaxation, and the sense of being deservedly rewarded, to appreciate the pleasure that smoking can give. Unfortunately, many of those who campaign with religious fervour against smoking have never themselves experienced such pleasures or are so blinded by the need to prevent smoking associated diseases that they do not pause to observe the evidence of pleasure which is plain for all to see.

Let me say at this point that a long time ago I was a light smoker and that I still clearly remember the pleasures and the satisfaction. However, I gave up because, for me, the risks outweighed the pleasures and I could manage without the satisfaction. Today, like most other members of the medical profession, I advise most people, if possible, not to smoke or to cut down. In fact, historically, I was giving such advice many years before the medical profession as a whole woke up to the extent of the problem of smoking-associated disease. Even if today I considered that, in my own case, the pleasures of smoking outweigh the risks, I would nevertheless feel it incumbent of me to 'set a good example' by being a non-smoker.

Having made my own position clear, let me now say that I despise band-wagons, I am angered by dishonesty and misrepresentation, and deplore insensitivity. Anti-smoking campaigning has become a band-wagon. Life-long non-smokers climb onto soap boxes and preach about the dangers of smoking without the vaguest conception of the social implications of what they are saying. Smoking is blamed for virtually all diseases irrespective of the medico-scientific evidence. Trivial aspects of the smoking habit are misrepresented, and the more privileged members of society who find it easier to dispense with the pleasure of smoking pontificate to the less privileged for whom smoking is much more important. Anti-smoking propagandism is a pursuit for the upper and middle classes and rich countries and a political tool.

There exist today in our country and in other countries many people for whom the solace offered by smoking is one of the very few pleasures of life. Perhaps their spouses have died, they are lonely, they are deprived of the opportunity of creative self-expression, they are oppressed by labour or anxiety or guilt, the future looks black, they regard themselves as failures. It may not help such people at all, to urge them to give up the one thing that actively gives them pleasure irrespective of health risks. I know such people and so should any sensitive person who is a sympathetic observer. To preach antismoking to such people may be both unkind and unhelpful. Their real problems are of social origin and not due to smoking. Those who wish to help them should concentrate on the causes of their plight rather than endeavour to deprive them of an important source of solace!

Smoking is, in fact, a highly complex pastime. Some regard smoking simply as self administration of nicotine, however this is clearly a gross over-simplification. One only has to be a smoker or to watch smokers to realise that there are numerous subtleties and aspects of the habit which mean that the spectrum of pleasures is highly individualistic. Watch the rituals of selecting a cigarette, of tapping out the tobacco, the lighting up with the favourite lighter, the expression on the face with the first draw, the way different parts of the inhaled smoke escape from the mouth or down the nose prior to the exhalation of diluted smoke from the lungs, the way that some smokers trickle smoke from their mouths in such a way that they can then inhale it via their noses; observe the way the cigarette is held, the way the ash is tapped off, the satisfaction at producing a smoke-ring; again, listen to the discussions on the merits and demerits of different brands and the way they are packaged and be aware of the social barriers which the offering round of cigarettes breaks down.

Obviously there is much more to the smoking habit than just nicotine. Indeed for some smokers - those

who do not inhale – nicotine is not involved at all, because pharmacologically active doses of nicotine can only be obtained from UK-type cigarettes if the smoke is taken into the lungs. No wonder, therefore that nicotine chewing gum is a non-starter as a substitute for smoking in the case of most smokers. Offering a guest a piece of gum or chewing such is not only socially graceless ^{but} it lacks most of the subtle aspects of pleasure that smoking offers.

There must be many who remember the childhood excitement of the first surreptitious cigarette in the garden shed – the enormous satisfaction of being able to do something which only adults are supposed to do. Contrary to the misleading propaganda indulged in by some antismokers – such garden-shed experiments are pretty harmless and do not lead to addiction in the same way as experiments with hard drugs. In a day and age when the smoking habit is on the decline, the fact that the number of ex-smokers is steadily increasing gives the lie to suggestion that nicotine is a highly addictive drug. For the most part, the reason why smokers continue to smoke is because they enjoy it – it gives pleasure, reward, interest, relief, solace and satisfaction. Nicotine is a part – and for many smokers an important part – of the pleasure. Its pharmacological and neuropharmacological effects are built into the series of conditioned reflexes that make up the smoking habit. Like other forms of pleasure (e.g. eating caviar if you like it, drinking gin and tonic, sexual intercourse) it would be difficult to give up voluntarily. A desire for a known pleasure is not tantamount to ^{he} addition nor is going through a conditioned reflex or completing the full pattern of behavioural ritual. I am personally very glad that my children, all of whom ^{by} doubtless went through the garden-shed experiment, ended up as non-smokers. I am even more glad that ^{by} antismoking campaigners did not lead them to believe that smoking is just as dangerous as hard drugs, so that if they experimented with the one they might as well do so with the other, the risks being comparable.

One of the ways in which antismoking campaigners have distorted the truth is to give the impression that there has been a massive upsurge in the incidence of smoking by school children. Even though, as I explain below, this is simply not true, the Tobacco Industry has undertaken a massive campaign aimed at reducing the illegal sale of tobacco products to school children. The true picture is that smoking in children is not increasing but is actually declining. Similar surveys carried out by the Government's Office of Population Censuses and Surveys in 1982 and 1984 revealed no significant trend in either direction. This was true for both England and Wales and for Scotland.

Percentage of children falling into different smoking categories

	England and Wales		Scotland	
	1982	1984	1982	1984
NUMBER OF PUPILS	2979	3658	2287	2798
	%	%	%	%
Has never smoked	47	45	39	39
Tried smoking once	24	23	24	23
Used to smoke	10	10	13	13
Smoked occasionally	8	9	9	8
Smokes regularly	11	13	15	16
	100	100	100	100

^{land} The 2% apparent increase in children who smoke regularly in England, Wales and the 1% in Scotland have been presented by Antismoking Campaigners as indicating a serious increasing trend. In reality, of course, these differences are not statistically significant. Furthermore, the fact that with the passage of time youngsters have been increasingly willing to admit that they smoke almost certainly biased the tabulated figures in the opposite direction.

The world is full of interesting and fascinating things to see and do. It should be possible for almost everyone to find fulfilment in personal achievement and creativity. But for many reasons – particularly social insensitivity, selfishness and greed – all too many people are deprived of the training needed to enjoy the world and to be meaningfully creative within it. Bombardment by television is all too often allowed to extinguish the flame of creativity. It is in this kind of circumstance that smoking takes a hold. In a perfect world, no-one would need the pleasures of smoking to counter social deprivation or personal adversity. However, in the imperfect world as it is, smoking serves a function for which there is no obvious alternative and certainly no obviously safer alternative.

“Tobacco truly taken, neat, as a Thing.
Tobacco tasted exactly; in waves or ring
Noted; tobacco blown to the wind, or watched
Melt into ether's farthest smother unmatched.”

by Ivor Gurney 1890-1937

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