PS1 for 7/13/89 Is Physicians' Advice Good for Your Health?

The old saying, confession is good for the soul, applies to an article in a recent **American Medical News** entitled "When More Doctors Smoked Camels." It is illustrated with color reproductions of magazine ads from the 1930s and '40s which would be funny today if they weren't so tragic.

"More Doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette" was one ad headline. The question, "What cigarette do you smoke, Doctor?" was asked of 112,397, with the result that "The brand named most was Camel!"

A friendly white-coated doctor in another ad advised "20,679 Physicians say Luckies are less irritating." The subhead proclaimed that Lucky Strike cigarettes are "Your Throat Protection against irritation against cough," and the fine print boasted that "The figures quote have been checked and certified to by Lybrand, Ross Bros. and Montgomery, Accountants."

Cigarette ads were carried by prestigious medical journals such as the **New England Journal of Medicine, Journal of the American Medical Association** known as **JAMA**, and **The Lancet** from the 1930s through the 1950s. The **New York State Journal of Medicine** carried Chesterfield ads in the 1930s with claims such as, "Just as pure as the water you drink."

Cigarette ads continued in some medical journals even longer. **MD** magazine carried cigarette ads in the 1960s, **Medical Dimensions** ran a Vantage ad in 1978, and as late as 1983 **Physician East** published an ad for Carlton.

In 1935 the **New York State Medical Journal** ran an ad asserting that "scientific" studies showed that Philip Morris cigarettes were less irritating, and a 1943 ad in the **National Medical Journal** said that "tests showed three out of every four cases of smokers' cough cleared on changing to Phillip Morris." **JAMA** carried an ad in 1949 that stated: "Many leading nose and throat specialists suggest, Change to Philip Morris."

Well, so much for the "health" advice given by some doctors, for the willingness of doctors' professional groups to take cigarette advertising money, and for the years of non-advice from physicians' associations in the face of massive evidence that smoking is one of the unhealthiest things one can do. Since some 300,000 Americans die every year of smoking related causes, smoking cigarettes is a health problem whose magnitude dwarfs even other health problem today.

Shifting from past embarrassments to present problems, let's look at some medical advice given in a current issue of **JAMA** about what this leading medical magazine concedes is a public health problem "now nearly out of control." **JAMA** calls it the "Silent Epidemic of Social Disease," and it's about the tremendous increase of cases of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Antibiotics are simply not able to stem the tide of the depressing numbers. In addition to the much-publicized AIDS figures, here are the figures for the **new** U.S. cases **every** year: gonorrhea

1 to 2 million, chlamydia 4 million, pelvic inflammation 500,000, genital warts 750,000, herpes 500,000, and syphilis 100,000.

The article says that one of the biggest problems is that teenagers become infected with STDs and pass along the infection without ever feeling ill or knowing they've been infected. One of the results is the tragic loss of fertility by millions of young women who get chlamydia and don't know it (because it is asymptomatic) until it is too late.

The articles admit that "little understanding exists about the factors that motivate adolescents to initiate sexual activity," and that "evidence is weak for the impact of sex education on sexual behavior an adolescent pregnancy." Actually, the March issue of the professional journal **Pediatrics** reported that, after five studies of classroom sexuality curricula in different parts of the country, the researchers concluded that sex education has little or no effect on reducing or postponing teenage sexual activity.

Despite this lack of knowledge, the doctors advise classroom sex education from kindergarten through high school graduation "as is the practice in Sweden," and even suggest classroom role-playing of sexual situation. In addition, they urge the installation of "school-based clinics" to dispense contraceptives and "confidential" counseling (which means without parental consent).

Telling teenagers how to engage in sexual activity without telling them that VD is epidemic, and that the only sure way to avoid getting it is to remain chaste before marriage and faithful afterwards, is advice as unhealthy as telling people which brand of cigarettes to smoke without telling them they might get lung cancer. It's not surprising that funding for the writing of this **JAMA** article was provide by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which is a major promoter of school-based clinics.

Don't assume that advice in physicians' magazines will necessarily promote good health. Teenage promiscuity is just as unhealthy as smoking.