

Editorial

Addiction for sale

It is our responsibility, as members of a health profession, to participate actively in all health care issues, whether or not specifically regarding oral health. Since tobacco use involves both oral and general health, the issue is clear—the dental profession must do its part to discourage use of tobacco, whether smoked or chewed.

Let there be no doubt that the people who manufacture, market, or in any way support the use of tobacco products are antihealth. In a previous editorial, I referred to the international tobacco companies as the "Merchants of Death." Well, the Merchants of Death are at it again. The marketing strategy of the international companies is to create addiction for the express purpose of selling more product—product, which, if used as intended, will lead to the impairment and death of millions of their customers.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), tobacco is the single, largest preventable cause of death in the world today, killing at least 2.5 million people each year. The tobacco companies view death cynically as lost customers—customers that need to be replaced. Recent marketing strategy of the tobacco companies involves replacing dead customers with Third World populations and with children. After all, children, when hooked on nicotine, provide a long-term customer base.

What can be done?

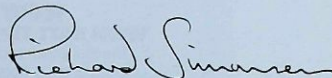
Local communities across the United States have been successful in enacting legislation concerning the sale of tobacco to minors. For example, in Woodbridge, Illinois, virtually 100% compliance against illegal sales was obtained by using compliance checks with the assistance of underage "buyers." Faced with these serious successes, the Tobacco Institute, an organization of persons who apparently believe that the ill health of consumers is an acceptable price to pay for corporate and personal prosperity, launched its own campaign, "It's the Law." Supposedly, this campaign is intended to eliminate the illegal sale of tobacco to minors.

The challenge was clear: could the Tobacco Institute beat 100% compliance? The results: a recent pub-

lication by DiFranza and Brown¹ in the *American Journal of Public Health* reported that 86% of the retailers participating in the "It's the Law" program were willing to sell cigarettes illegally to children. Faced with the smashing success of 14% compliance, the tobacco industry then generously sponsored a bill in Massachusetts to make it illegal for police to carry out Woodbridge-style compliance checks. DiFranza and Brown concluded, "the industry's attempt at self-regulation has been completely ineffective at reducing children's access to tobacco. . . . The enforcement of these [tobacco access] laws is the responsibility of the health community and should not be left to the tobacco industry."

The Third World has major problems of disease and malnutrition that absorb most preventive health resources. In general, tobacco consumption is growing fastest in the world's poorest and hungriest countries. A major reason for the increase in smoking in the Third World is the ruthless promotional campaigning of the international tobacco companies. Their latest ploy—hire a big gun. News reports indicate that nonsmoker Margaret Thatcher has been hired by the Phillip Morris tobacco company for \$1 million to serve as its international political consultant. That's sad. From Iron Maiden to Marlboro Woman. She will now, as reported by the Associated Press, "help resist attempts to ban cigarette advertising in the European Community." Tragically, increased penetration of Third World markets is probably also high on the tobacco company's list of objectives for this history-making figure.

The shameful barter between profits and health must stop. Dentistry must do its part by supporting antitobacco legislation at every opportunity.



Richard J. Simonsen
Editor-in-Chief

1. DiFranza JR, Brown LJ: The Tobacco Institute's "It's the Law" campaign: has it halted illegal sales of tobacco to children? *Am J Public Health* 1992;82:1271-1272.