

Grannis F.: Lung Cancer in Women 1929 to 2016: Cold-Blooded Origins of an Epidemic

Background:

The epidemiologic profile of lung cancer mortality in the U.S. is highly unusual. Mortality in males began to rise rapidly early in the 1920s and continued to increase through the 1990s before leveling off. Mortality in women did not begin to rise until decades later and did not approximate mortality in men until the early years of the twenty first century. This unusual pattern of disease can be explained by review of tobacco industry documents and court records.

Methods:

A search was conducted in the Legacy Tobacco Documents library at the University of California, San Francisco, as well as review of testimony and legal reports from state and federal court decisions.

Results:

The beginning of the epidemic of lung cancer in women in the U.S. can be reliably traced back to Easter Sunday in 1929. On that date, a publicity stunt crafted by Edward Bernays was reported in the New York Times as the "parade of torches" supposedly representing an expression of freedom by American women who would henceforward not be constrained from smoking in public. The public relations effort was supplemented by an advertising campaign orchestrated by Chicago marketing expert Albert Lasker. Female smoking rates began to rise after this date, culminating over the succeeding decades in a sharp increase in lung cancer cases and deaths among women. A second phase of marketing of cigarettes to women and girls in the U.S. began in the 1970s as Philip Morris executive Joseph Cullman collaborated with tennis star Billie Jean King to market a new "slim" cigarette to young women via the Virginia Slims tennis tournament under the slogan "You've come a long way baby." A further contribution to the lung cancer mortality arose out of the efforts of the Council for Tobacco Research (CTR) and the Council for Indoor Air Research (CIAR) to manufacture controversy regarding the danger of smoking as well as involuntary second hand smoking to provide cover for legislators voting against tobacco control legislation. As a direct result, many thousands of non-smoking women have had major involuntary exposure to tobacco carcinogens in the workplace causing lung cancer.

Conclusion:

Lung cancer cases presenting today originated in deliberate campaigns by tobacco executives, marketers and public relations experts to convince women and girls to smoke, despite their clear understanding that the products they were aggressively marketing would inevitably result in hundreds of thousands of deaths.

Source: 17th World Conference on Lung Cancer, Vienna 2016