

What You Don't Smell Can't Kill You?

In the September 2000 issue of *Tobacco Control*, a journal of the British Medical Association, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health published a study citing that the major U.S tobacco companies have extensively studied and are possibly using new cigarette additives to hide secondhand smoke. Rather than focusing on lowering the harmful effects of secondhand smoke, tobacco companies have researched how to alter the *perception* of its exposure. These studies evaluated different chemicals that would alter the visibility, odor, and other annoying qualities of cigarette smoke. No serious effort was made to study the impact of these chemicals on the *toxicity* of tobacco smoke.

In 1996, the Massachusetts state legislature passed a law that required tobacco companies to provide full disclosure on the ingredients of cigarettes. Last week, a federal court struck down this law, stating that it would be unfair to force tobacco companies to reveal cigarette recipes that distinguish their brands by relying on distinctive flavors.

This federal decision sends the wrong message to the tobacco industry by consenting to the use of technology to mislead the public on the dangers associated with smoking. Tobacco companies are using these additives in an attempt to improve the social acceptability of smoking. If secondhand smoke is not a nuisance, people in those environments will be potentially more accepting of the exposure, and therefore more susceptible to health risks. According to R.J. Reynolds, one of their projects, labeled TF for "Tomorrow's Female," is targeted towards women who "want a fresher, cleaner smoking experience."¹ By reducing the irritating effects of

¹ Yahoo! News, "Tobacco Industry Uses Additives to Mask Odors," http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/nm/20000913/hl/additives_4.html.

secondhand smoke through Project TF, they are potentially exposing women and their children to more risks associated with smoke exposure, such as the development of respiratory diseases.

According to public health officials, secondhand smoke is estimated to kill 3,000 people in the United States every year. The government has a responsibility to protect the public and allow them to make informed decisions on exposure to harmful substances such as cigarette smoke. Therefore, tobacco additive regulations should be mandated by the government. The federal court's argument that ingredient disclosure threatens the competitive advantage of tobacco companies does not seem to be based on much supporting evidence. Food manufacturers, for example, are required by law to fully disclose their ingredients on food packages. What differentiates this industry from the tobacco industry?

If there is indeed evidence to support the threat to competitiveness theory, there is still a need for regulations that will allow government agencies, like the Department of Public Health, to be informed and conduct the appropriate studies on these ingredients. Their published findings will continue to educate the public on cigarette smoke, without revealing the specific details about those ingredients and harming the competitive nature of tobacco products.