

COVER ESSAY

Civil disobedience and tobacco control: the case of BUGA UP

Simon Chapman

One evening in 1978, three colleagues and I took what then seemed the provocative step of convening a public meeting in the lecture theatre of Sydney's city morgue. We each worked for the New South Wales (NSW) state government in community health education and had become increasingly disillusioned with the prevailing official view about smoking: that it was essentially a problem requiring individual behaviour change, instead of "upstream" policy solutions. Educational programmes directed at helping children to resist smoking were said to be the answer, although all the while tobacco advertising ran riot in all media except radio and television, where it had been banned since 1976.

Our plan was to form a public interest group that would provide an uncompromised alternative media voice to the staid and cautious equivocations of government officials. That night MOP UP (Movement Opposed to the Promotion of Unhealthy Products) was born. The group, which was to never have more than a dozen active members, went on to notch two notable achievements—pursuing a complaint that led to comedian Paul Hogan being removed from advertising Winfield cigarettes because of his popularity with children¹ and pressuring the Australian Lawn Tennis Association to drop its 12-year sponsorship deal with Marlboro for the Australian Open championship, following a series of annual shaming demonstrations outside the tennis courts.

However, the history of tobacco control will mostly record that night's meeting for another reason. During the discussion about the sort of activities in which MOP UP might become involved (deluging regulatory agencies with complaints, demonstrations, and criticism of the government), two in the audience became impatient and said they had not come along just to help write letters. They urged those present to join them in taking more direct action against tobacco advertising by graffitiing the billboard advertising that at the time was the most common form of outdoor advertising in Australia. At the end of the meeting they announced that they would be forming a splinter group—BUGA UP (Billboard Utilising Graffitiists Against Unhealthy Promotions).

As a name, "BUGA UP" had the virtue of being phonetically identical to a common slang term and pidgin English* expression: to "bugger up", meaning to make a mess of, or to destroy.² Being mildly *risqué*, the expression and so the group's name took on added appeal

to those who delighted in the Australian penchant for irreverence. Schoolchildren, traditionally a hard-to-reach group for health educators, found the very sound of BUGA UP highly appealing.

The two founding "members" of BUGA UP were Bill Snow, a printer and environmentalist, and Rick Bolzan, an artist whose principal concern was the way that outdoor advertising visually blighted communities. Both had been "re-facing" billboards for several months but at a rate that was quickly to prove tame. They first signed a billboard with BUGA UP in October 1978. Over the next decade, a growing body of people, signing their work with the BUGA UP acronym, graffitiing tens of thousands of billboards across Australia. In the last week of September 1994, billboards advertising tobacco were finally banned in Australia.[†] Figure 1 shows the last known BUGA UP signed billboard, near the author's home in Sydney.

BUGA UP's activities and reputation spread rapidly around Australia and then internationally—thanks largely to Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans (figure 2), who gave a vivid presentation on BUGA UP at the Fifth World Conference on Tobacco and Health in Winnipeg in 1983 where he received extensive international press coverage.³ The legacy of BUGA UP's actions is considered by many who have both participated in and observed tobacco control policy to have been profound. Its activities are widely regarded as being pivotal to the process by which Australian tobacco control evolved from being the somewhat eccentric preoccupation of a few pioneering doctors and neo-puritan temperance types, into an issue that now rarely fails to gain anything under 70% to 80% support in public opinion polls, no matter what the particular focus. BUGA UP is credited by many to have played an outstanding role in politicising tobacco control. The group's direct messages helped move the focus of tobacco control beyond individual models of tobacco use, and firmly onto a set of objectives that required governments to act to control the tobacco industry's marketing activities.⁴

*For example, Prince Charles broke into pidgin at the end of a speech in Papua New Guinea in 1975 saying "Af de ren I bagarup mi nau arait", which translates as "Unfortunately rain caused me some inconvenience yesterday, but now everything is alright." Cited in reference 2 on page 69.

†Only point-of-sale tobacco advertising now remains.

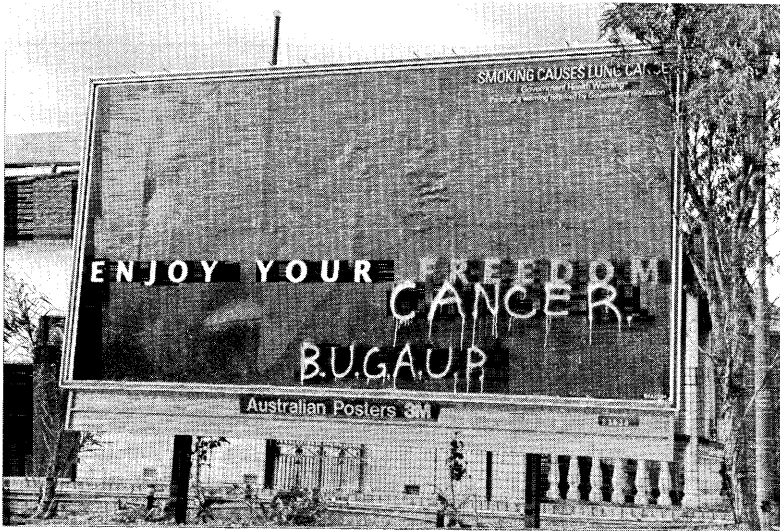


Figure 1 The last known BUGA-UPed billboard in Australia, advertising Freedom cigarettes (see *Tobacco Control* 1995;4:289–90).



Figure 2 Arthur Chesterfield-Evans performing surgery on a billboard.

In this essay I will describe some of BUGA UP's strategies—which went well beyond its renowned graffiti—and comment on its contribution to the eventual all-but-total ban on tobacco advertising in Australia that came to fruition at the end of 1995.

What was BUGA UP?

BUGA UP can perhaps best be described as a “movement” of like-minded individuals, often quite unknown to each other, who could reliably be said to share only one characteristic: that they signed their billboard graffiti with the acronym BUGA UP. It had no phone number, no office bearers, and no official identity. Interestingly, despite being a group avowedly involved with civil disobedience, the government post office allowed it to maintain post box addresses in four cities, through which BUGA UP would receive letters of support and donations from community members. It also was allowed to operate a bank account.

Its members would generally come to know of each other by word of mouth, and in Sydney, Melbourne, and Perth, tight-knit groups would often organise well-planned, night-long raids in which hundreds of boards were regularly sprayed. Those involved were from many walks of life, including doctors, health workers, teachers, and parents. Although health issues were at the forefront of BUGA UP's concerns, the movement was decidedly community based and in no way controlled by public health activists.

Graffiti

BUGA UP was best known for its spray-painted graffiti on outdoor advertising. Its main targets were tobacco advertisements, although some in the movement also altered alcohol, sexist, gambling, and “conspicuous consumption” advertising (“Consume. Be Silent. Die.”). This diversification caused some debate, mainly among those who did not themselves spray, about the way it might cause loss of community support. If this ever occurred, BUGA UP activists were undeterred.

The cover of this issue of *Tobacco Control* and figures 3–7⁵⁻⁷ show examples of BUGA UP graffiti. In most cases, sprayers tried to change advertising slogans by the careful alteration of words or lettering. Whenever possible, they would attempt to do this using several differently coloured sprays, blending in with

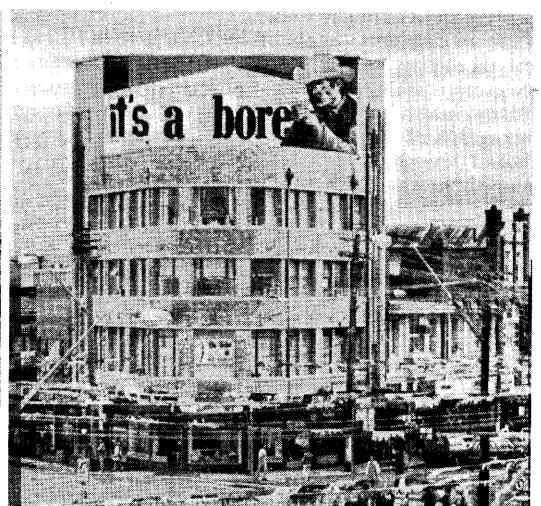


Figure 3 “Preop” (left) and “postop” (right) versions of a Marlboro billboard.



Figure 4 Other BUGA UP “refacings”.



Figure 5



Figure 6

the original, so that the altered wording would at first glance appear to be unchanged. Brand names and slogans were often changed with a few careful additions and deletions (Sterling became Stinking; Benson & Hedges—Burnson & Stenches; Dunhill—Dunghill or Lungill; Longbeach—Lungbeach or Lungleach; John Player Special—Lung Slayer Special; Rothmans King Size—Rotman’s Lung Sizzle; New,

Mild and Marlboro—New, Vile and a Bore.) Blunt messages to smokers, tobacco companies, and the government were also added. Whenever possible, humour was used. This was sometimes scatological (“The taste of Marlboro” became “The taste of stale farts”); sexual (“Anyhow . . . have a Winfield” became “Anyhow . . . have a Wank* . . . it’s healthier!”); and topical (when the UK’s heavily smoking Princess Margaret was hospitalised for a lung complaint, graffiti appeared on an advertisement adding “. . . for lungs like Princess Margaret’s”). Messages naming tobacco and advertising industry executives were also written.

In BUGA UP’s peak years, sprayers were active in all states of Australia. As BUGA UP’s ranks swelled and its activities became more widespread, the outdoor advertising industry began to site more tobacco advertising high out of reach of handheld spray cans. BUGA UP responded by inventing extension devices with wired spray button triggers, which allowed them to reach these sites. When boards moved still higher, they began to use paint-filled small balloons and blown eggshells. These could be projected many metres, producing a paint-bombed effect (figure 8). Occasionally, BUGA UP activists cut down billboards in isolated locations.

Arrests

Nearly all BUGA UP activists were able to cite many instances of being cheered on by passers-by who saw them in action. Over ten years, BUGA UP veterans recall about thirty people being arrested and charged with various offences concerned with wilful damage to property. Some of those charged pleaded guilty and took the opportunity to make often lengthy and passionate dock statements explaining their motives. Others, such as Chesterfield-Evans, elected to plead not guilty, citing the defence of necessity.⁵ This defence argues that breaking laws can be justified if the defendant can show intent to prevent some higher order of wrongdoing. Chesterfield-Evans, for example, sought to argue, “If I saw someone about to tip cholera germs into the water supply, I would try to stop him, even if it meant stealing the flask”, and he asserted that he would be exonerated by a court for doing so. He went on to argue that, as a doctor, he found the intent and consequences of tobacco advertising equally reprehensible and felt justified in breaking what he argued was a trivial law in the hope of preventing the diseases that would result from the success of tobacco advertising. This defence never succeeded, but it allowed lawyers and defendants to argue for many hours of court time.

The arrests and subsequent court cases provided huge publicity opportunities. The media would invariably report such incidents and include comments from those arrested about BUGA UP’s objectives. In 1982 Judge Loveday of the NSW district court said, in his

*“To wank” is a common slang expression for masturbation.



Figure 7

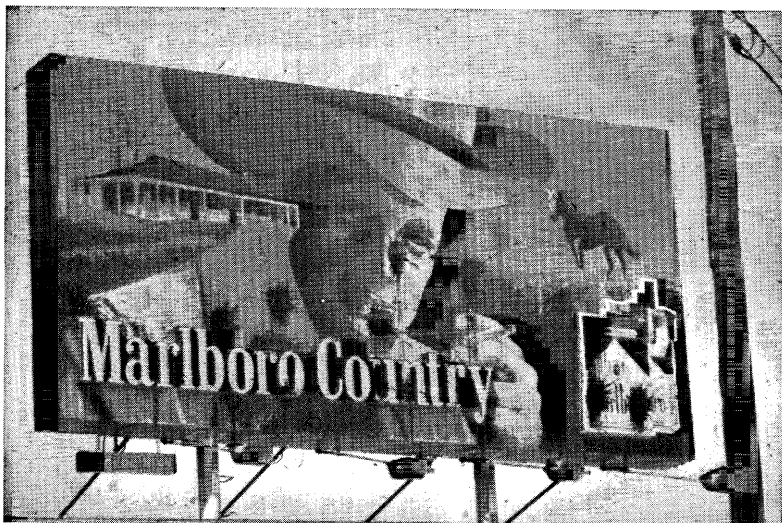


Figure 8 A paint-bombed billboard.

summing up and of fining each defendant \$A35, "As a non-smoker who has to put up with the others who smoke and from what I have read about the deleterious effects on health, I have the utmost sympathy for you, or any person doing what he thinks can be done to remedy the matter . . . The commission of this crime was of the highest idealistic nature."⁶ Several lengthy feature articles were published in the magazine and commentary sections of quality newspapers⁷⁻⁹; two national television current affairs programmes ran major programmes focusing on BUGA UP doctors who had been arrested; and a British BBC television crew flew from London in October 1983 to make an hour-long programme for the *QED* series. A prime-time TV current affairs programme provided bail for one arrested sprayer on the promise that he would be interviewed exclusively that night on national television.

Media coverage invariably focused on what is best described as the Robin Hood phenomenon. BUGA UP activists were people, often revealed as entirely normal and respected citizens, who risked a criminal record in order to make their point. As those active in BUGA UP often said, "What is the worse crime? To vandalise the paper sheeting on an advertising hoarding, or to meekly accept the right of wealthy corporations to promote carcinogenic

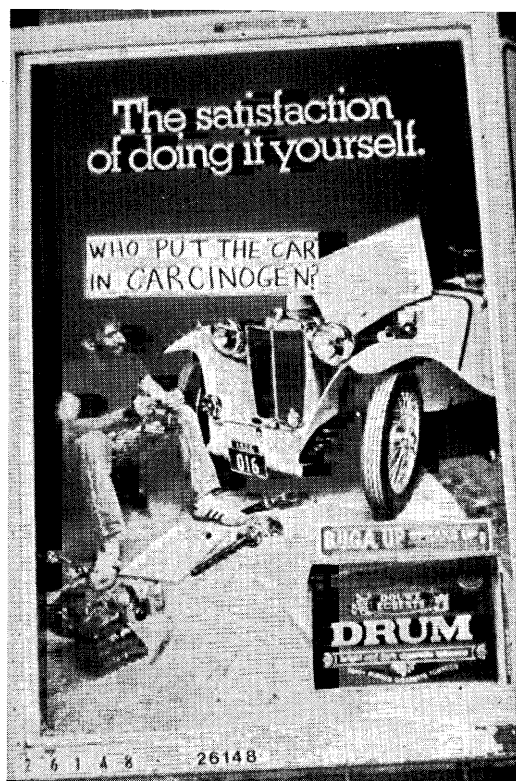


Figure 9 Roll-on graffiti.

products to children?" Those arrested included an elderly professor of education, a radiologist, and several other doctors and medical students. BUGA UP was a patent manifestation of the tradition of non-violent civil disobedience, which has existed since antiquity,¹⁰ and whose prominent exponents have included Gandhi,¹¹ the suffragette movement, and more recently, Greenpeace.

Other BUGA UP activities

Members of the group, particularly in Sydney, became very active in other forms of action against tobacco advertising. The following are examples.

- In 1982 Rick Bolzan chained himself to a Marlboro-sponsored Formula One racing car that was parked in the foyer of the Art Gallery of NSW, where an Edward Hopper exhibition sponsored by Philip Morris was on view.¹² His supporters emptied thousands of collected butts all over the car, while alerted television crews taped the event.
- Various "roll-on" adhesive messages were printed, which could be rapidly and discreetly glued across shop-front, in-store, and bus-side advertising. Examples included "Who put the car in carcinogen?" (figure 9)
- BUGA UP staged alternative advertising "award" evenings, where they parodied the advertising industry's annual self-congratulatory awards. The award, the "Advertising Bogie", was a gold spray can mounted on an engraved plinth. In 1982 BUGA UP's award went to an advertisement for Sterling cigarettes that showed a hand taking a cigarette from an extended

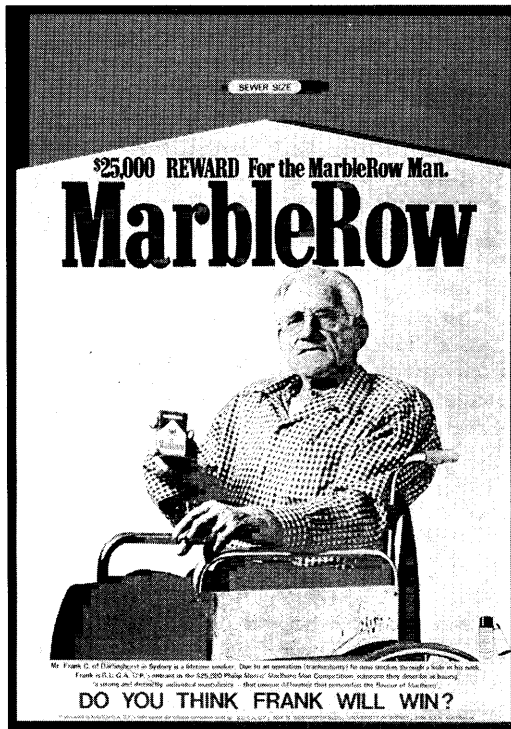


Figure 10 BUGA UP's Marlboro Man contest entrant.

pack in the foreground of a photograph of a mass crowd running in Sydney's annual city-to-surf race. The caption read "Let's take the car for a run instead—what a Sterling idea!" BUGA UP reproduced the advertisement in a poster superimposed with a legless smoker suffering from Buerger's disease.

- When cash awards were given to retailers by Rothmans to reward tobacco advertising window displays, BUGA UP wrote to the retailers offering to double their money if they removed the advertising. There were no takers, but plenty of publicity.
 - A 1982 search by Philip Morris for a new Australian Marlboro Man, resulted in BUGA UP entering an elderly man in a wheelchair who still smoked through his tracheostomy. A poster was produced (figure 10) and placed on hundreds of street lamps throughout Sydney. Dr Alan Blum, then editor of the *Medical Journal of Australia*, placed the poster on the front cover of the journal.¹³ Fearing BUGA UP would bring the man to the announcement, Philip Morris held the muted award at a secret location under tight security.
 - Sydney BUGA UP developed a marketing arm, selling printed teeshirts and souvenir spray cans, and printing high-quality posters showing dozens of colour photographs of their "greatest hits". These were in high demand and often seen on health centre noticeboards and children's bedroom walls. One of the teeshirts, featuring the "Burnson and Stenches" logo, mimicked the real thing so closely that people wearing them occasionally received rude comments from the public, until the spoof was pointed out.
 - Just as the men's singles final at the 1984 Marlboro Australian Open tennis champi-
- onship was reaching its climax, a BUGA UP member with a pilot's licence skywrote "Cancer Country" in the skies above the courts. After a 12-year deal, the Marlboro sponsorship was quietly terminated the next year.
- Delegates to a World Advertising Federation Conference at Sydney's Opera House in 1988 were invited to enter a makeshift "confessional" called the "redeem-a-'tiser", erected on the main approach, and confess their "sins" if they had worked on tobacco accounts. The stunt was immensely popular and newsworthy, and generated much discussion among the delegates about the ethics of tobacco advertising. A stolen car was burnt outside an activist's house the next night, presumably to try and intimidate the group.
 - A BUGA UP "embassy" was set up on a vacant block in a business district opposite Marlboro's advertising agency, Leo Burnett. Passers-by were handed leaflets designed to shame the agency.
 - BUGA UP held a publicity-stunt car wash outside the gates of Sydney's annual agricultural exhibition show. Attracting hundreds of thousands of children, the show environs were wallpapered with tobacco advertising. The theory behind the car wash was that it always rains hours after you wash your car—the tongue-in-cheek hope being that the show would be washed out with heavy rain, spoiling the tobacco industry's efforts to advertise to children. BUGA UP had publicly demanded that, unless the cigarette advertising was removed from the show it would be washed out. Sure enough, as the news cameras rolled, the heavens opened obligingly.
 - Bill Snow collected a small truckload of cigarette butts from pavements. He publicly threatened to dump them all in Sydney's famous harbour, to illustrate how many butts routinely would wash, via stormwater, into the harbour after rain.
 - When free cigarette sample promotions were being held in shopping centres, BUGA UP members would attempt to converge dressed in skeleton costumes, handing out literature to passers-by.
 - BUGA UP became the source of more formal complaints to the self-regulatory Advertising Standards Council (ASC) about cigarette advertising than from any other group. Peter Vogel, the co-inventor of the famous Fairlight music synthesiser, became an active BUGA UP member in 1981. Vogel was to become one of BUGA UP's most active members and the author of so many formal complaints that, in July 1985, he was (to his pride) declared a "vexatious litigant" by the ASC, which took the astonishing step of declaring that it would no longer review his complaints, regardless of their merit.
 - BUGA UP activists busked as "The Royal Carcinogenic Orchestra" outside a tobacco-sponsored series of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. They entered a Christmas party

costume competition staged by socialite supporters of the Australian ballet, which was sponsored by Benson and Hedges. The BUGA UP entrants wore tutus emblazoned with "Smokers are dying to bring you the ballet".

As well as the very public shaming campaigns against the advertising industry, BUGA UP waged a more private war against advertising agencies that handled tobacco accounts and also against the industry's system of self-regulation, which it routinely referred to as "shelf" regulation to ridicule the inevitable destiny of almost all submitted complaints.

In 1985, BUGA UP established a mock organisation called the Advertising Double Standards Council (ADSC), which mercilessly satirised the industry's own ASC. The ADSC published a booklet explaining its functions, modelled closely on the ASC's literature. The ASC publication was called *Self-regulation of Australian advertising*, whereas the ADSC publication was *Self-preservation of Australian advertising*. The ADSC publication highlighted the absurdity of self-regulation, with statements such as: "If advertising standards are a good thing, then double standards are twice as good."

BUGA UP placed an advertisement in the advertising industry journal *B&T*, promoting the booklet. Requests for copies were sometimes accompanied by donations and notes to the effect of "Keep up the good work". At the same time, BUGA UP sent letters to advertising companies, satirising the ASC. These letters contained requests such as "Before Council can determine the outcome of this complaint, I need more information about your organisation (in particular how much money you have) so that I can know which organisation to favour."

The outdoor advertising industry was understandably angered by BUGA UP and in 1985 launched a major outdoor advertising campaign which, although never naming the group, sought to forge an association between the vandalism of trains and phone booths with BUGA UP's graffiti. The campaign was soon abandoned after substantial criticism from within the advertising industry and with no discernible change in the enormous folk-hero status BUGA UP enjoyed.

Legacy of BUGA UP

Elsewhere¹⁴ I have commented on the way that the allocation of resources for the evaluation of influences on smoking in communities tends to be driven by concerns to assess the impact of circumscribed, controllable interventions. This preoccupation with planned, official "interventions" rather than an attitude that seeks to explain the changing culture of smoking in communities, often results in the research neglect of what commonsense would suggest are very significant influences.

Although Australia in the early 1980s saw the conduct of several large, expensive evaluation studies in the smoking area,¹⁵⁻¹⁶ no formal evaluations were ever undertaken of the social and political impact of BUGA UP—of the way

that its activities and the content of its messages entered into the conversations and imaginations of both ordinary people and political decision makers. For perhaps eight years, BUGA UP's changed billboards were arguably the most common anti-smoking message presented to the average Australian. BUGA UP's messages were unsanitised by the anxieties about taste for which committees of health bureaucrats are renowned, nor laden down with the earnest directives of social learning theorists. Instead they were spontaneous, forthright, sarcastic, humorous, and above all, arresting—in both senses of the word. They became a common topic of conversation in countless settings. It became commonplace for otherwise conservative senior medical leaders to include slides of BUGA UP's work in their otherwise staid lectures and public presentations.

Chesterfield-Evans' own analysis of BUGA UP's contribution was that its radicalism allowed hitherto conservative medical and health groups to venture, often for the first time, into the debate on tobacco advertising. By providing a "no prisoners" discourse on tobacco advertising that admitted no shirking, BUGA UP forced these groups to declare their hands or risk being seen as wholly irrelevant to a debate that had captured the interest of a huge section of the community. The ethical line that BUGA UP had drawn in the sand demanded that health groups either side with them, or with those groups in the community that condemned BUGA UP—the tobacco and advertising industries. The conservative health groups seldom gave open endorsement to BUGA UP, but began to support the debate against tobacco advertising through lobbying, submission writing, networking, and the funding of groups such as Action on Smoking and Health and the Australian Council on Smoking and Health.

Nigel Gray, for 27 years the head of the Anti Cancer Council of Victoria and current president of the International Union Against Cancer, believes that any history of tobacco control in Australia that neglected to acknowledge the decisive role of BUGA UP would be written in ignorance. The irony is that if this history were to be captured from the collected writings of medical journals, and government and non-government agency reports, BUGA UP would barely rate a mention.

International initiatives

BUGA UP inspired several similar movements in the UK and the USA. Between 1982 and 1985 in Great Britain, a heavy bout of acronymic disease broke out with graffiti groups forming in Bristol (COUGHUP—Citizens' Organisation Using Graffiti to Halt Unhealthy Promotions; and COUGHIN—Citizens' Organisation Using Graffiti for Health in Neighbourhoods) and London (TREES—Those Resisting an Early End from Smoking). Several activists were apprehended by the police, with news of a Bristol arrest reported completely fallaciously in purple

prose by the *Sunday Times* ("Subversives from an anarchist organisation in Australia have been sent to Britain. They have set up a cell in Bristol, and are now moving to London").¹⁷

In the United States, several groups around the country are altering tobacco billboards. A social protest group called Cicada, made up of New Jersey artists, was recently reported as replacing a tanned, happy smoker on a Kool billboard in New York City with a sheet-covered corpse. Another group, the Philadelphia Troublemakers and Anarchists (PTA), adds graffiti to billboards advertising Basic cigarettes. Under the slogan "Your Basic Message", PTA painted: "You give them money, they give you cancer."¹⁸

In 1991, "re-facers" were active in at least three American cities. In Chicago, the Reverend Michael Pflieger was arrested and subsequently acquitted of charges that he defaced tobacco and alcohol billboards in his African American and Hispanic neighbourhood.¹⁹ The Reverend Calvin Butts was also whitening-out billboards in Harlem, New York,²⁰ and ex-smoker Donald House was arrested after defacing the giant Marlboro billboard in a San Diego stadium.²¹

In 1990 Smokefree Educational Services, a New York City-based organisation founded by Joe Cherner, began printing and selling stickers (\$10 for 50) with messages such as: "This ad insults camels . . . Camels aren't dumb enough to smoke!" and "Cancer is a communicable disease. You get it from tobacco companies!" Another sticker was in the shape of a medal, carrying the words "Tobacco Ads Lie—Award Winner". Soon health advocates were pasting thousands of stickers on cigarette advertisements throughout the city. "Although Smokefree Educational Services would *never* recommend obliterating cigarette ads with these stickers," noted the group in its newsletter,²² "we understand why health advocates feel compelled to do so." One such advocate was quoted as follows in the same article: "These stickers will educate subway riders. As I put a 'Hospitalized with Cancer' sticker over a smiling Newport model's face, a group of young subway riders shouted, 'All Right!' It made me feel good." The company that leased the advertising space from the city (Gannett Transit) complained that "It's graffiti and it's illegal." Cherner said he would stop selling the stickers

when Gannett provides permanent, free space on the subways for pro-health advertising.²³

In Canada, Vancouver-based Media Foundation's journal *Adbusters* has recently published spoof cigarette advertising in two issues (Spring and Winter 1996)*3 and has run an article on how to graffiti advertising, including an explicit instruction manual on making a BUGA UP-style sprayer's extension.²⁴

Ron Davis, Arthur Chesterfield-Evans, Cecilia Farren, Nigel Gray, and Peter Vogel each provided information for this essay.

- 1 Chapman S. A David and Goliath story: tobacco advertising in Australia. *BMJ* 1980;281:1187-90.
- 2 Wilkes GA. A dictionary of Australian colloquialisms. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1985:68-9.
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- 5 O'Connor D, Fairall PA. *Criminal defences*. Sydney: Butterworths, 1988:Ch 7.
- 6 Anon. Graffitiists face judge and jury. *Billboard* (BUGA UP newsletter) 1982 May:2.
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- 8 Margo J. The doctors who fight cancer with spray cans. *Sydney Morning Herald* 1983 Feb 19:32.
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- 21 McIntyre M. Confessed 'Billboard Bandit' caught in act. *San Diego Union* 1991 Jun 14:B3.
- 22 Anon. Stickers counter cigarette ads; poke fun at tobacco slogans. *Smokefree Air* (Smokefree Educational Services, New York City) Spring 1991:7.
- 23 Mittelbach M. Sticking it to tobacco ads. *Daily News* (New York) 1991 May 6.
- 24 Craig J. Adding the blemish of truth. Making little changes to billboards. *Adbusters* 1996 Winter:44-5.

One of these counter-advertisements was published in *Tobacco Control* 1996;5:109.

Note to readers

We hereby solicit your ideas and contributions for future covers of *Tobacco Control*. As with previous covers, we would like future covers to be colourful and creative—with a tobacco control theme. Original artwork, anti-tobacco posters, photographs, and cartoons may all be considered. Material with an international flavour would be particularly desirable. A cover essay will generally appear in each issue to provide appropriate background information and commentary on the cover.

Please send ideas and submissions (original or high-quality, camera-ready photographs) to the editor at the address on the inside front cover.—ED