

## Cigarette advertising and children's smoking: why Reg was withdrawn

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See editorial by S Chapman

### Abstract

**Objective**—To examine the appeal of the Embassy Regal "Reg" campaign to young people.

**Design**—Three quantitative surveys and one piece of qualitative research: (a) self completion questionnaire administered in classrooms, (b) questionnaire led interviews with children, (c) questionnaire led interviews with adults, and (d) group discussions with children and adults.

**Settings**—(a) Secondary and middle schools in England; (b) north of England, Scotland, and Wales; (c) north of England, Scotland, and Wales; and (d) Glasgow.

**Subjects**—(a) 5451 schoolchildren aged 11-15 recruited by stratified random sampling; (b) 437 children aged 5-10 recruited by quota sampling; (c) 814 adults aged 15-65 recruited by quota sampling; and (d) 12 groups of children aged 10-15, three groups of adults aged 18-24, and three groups of adults aged 35-55.

**Results**—Children were familiar with cigarette advertising and in particular the Reg campaign. Although younger children struggled to understand the creative content of the adverts, older and smoking children could understand and appreciate the humour. They considered Reg to be amusing and could relate to the type of joke used in the advert. In addition Reg's flippant attitude towards serious issues appealed to the children. While adults aged 18-24 understood the campaign they did not identify with it, and 35-55 year olds (the campaign's supposed target) were unappreciative of the campaign.

**Conclusions**—The Reg campaign was getting through to children more effectively than it was to adults and held most appeal for teenagers, particularly 14-15 year old smokers. It clearly contravened the code governing tobacco advertising, which states that advertising must not appeal to children more than it does to adults, and it may have had a direct impact on teenage smoking. In view of these findings the Advertising Standards Authority's decision to withdraw the Reg campaign seems appropriate.

### Introduction

Imperial Tobacco recently withdrew its advertising campaign featuring the character Reg (see figure), which had been supporting their Regal brand in the north of England, Scotland, and parts of Wales. This followed a complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority by the Health Education Authority. This paper describes the method and findings of the research that supported this complaint and ultimately contributed to the decision that Reg had to be withdrawn.

The publication of the Smee report has confirmed that tobacco advertising both induces and reinforces children's smoking.<sup>1</sup> In the absence of a complete ban there is a need to identify and guard against campaigns

that, contrary to the voluntary agreement on tobacco promotion,<sup>2</sup> have a particular appeal for young people. Anecdotal evidence suggested that Reg, although purportedly aimed at people aged over 35, comprised such a campaign. Research was therefore conducted to investigate children's and adults' response to the Reg adverts, covering levels of awareness and knowledge as well as deeper feelings about the campaign such as interest, likes and dislikes, and what if anything people might do as a result of seeing it. Answering these questions required both qualitative and quantitative research.

### Subjects and methods

#### QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The qualitative research was conducted with small group discussions. This procedure involved bringing together six to eight respondents, who were carefully selected in social demographic terms, in an informal setting under the direction of a psychologist or group moderator to discuss in depth the subject of interest. The method has been more fully described previously.<sup>3</sup>

One hundred and seventeen children and adults were interviewed in 18 groups. These groups were varied in terms of age (10-11, 12-13, 14-15, 18-24, or 35-55), gender, smoking status, and socioeconomic group (I, II, and III non-manual or III manual, IV, and V). The subjects were recruited by door to door canvassing by professional interviewers and invited to attend the group discussions at a prearranged venue. Each interviewer was supplied with strict quota controls and a recruitment questionnaire and instructed to leave at least four houses between each successful recruitment. Refusals for other than logistical reasons were minimal. Respondents were paid a standard fee for attending, and parental permission to participate was obtained for all the children. The fieldwork was conducted during March and April 1993 in Glasgow, where the Reg campaign had been run.

Each of the discussions with young people lasted about five hours. This enabled the children to relax and the researchers to use complex interviewing procedures, including a series of games about advertising. In these games the children matched products and slogans, described advertisements and products as people, and designed their own cigarette advertisement. With hindsight, the interviews were probably longer and more elaborate than necessary and the same data could probably have been retrieved in less time. The adult interviews lasted about one and a half hours, and, although the games were not introduced, the format was again informal and relaxed. All the discussions were tape recorded and then transcribed.

#### QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

For quantitative results, we made use of three existing, unpublished national surveys. The Health Education Authority's teenage smoking tracking survey wave 6 was one of a regular series of surveys of

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schoolchildren aged 11-15 in England that used a nationally representative sample of secondary and middle schools. The sample size for the survey was 5451 children recruited by stratified random sampling within the schools. Data were gathered in classrooms with self completion questionnaires, and a response rate of 95% was obtained. Two ongoing social surveys were also used, one of 437 children aged 5-10 (children's omnibus carried out by Carrick James Market Research for the Health Education Authority in 1993) and the other of 814 people aged 15-65 (adult omnibus carried out by the Market and Opinion Research Institute (MORI) for the Health Education Authority in 1993). Both were conducted in the north of England, Scotland, and Wales (where the Reg campaign had been run) by means of quota sampling and face to face interviews. Parental permission was obtained for the children's interviews.

The interviews varied slightly in content in the three surveys and covered a range of issues, including attitudes to smoking, behaviour, and perceptions of cigarette advertising. Care was taken to ensure that cigarette adverts shown to teenagers to prompt response did not contaminate questions about cigarette advertising generally or preference for cigarette brands. The use of these existing studies meant that the research had to accommodate different methodologies, which restricted the opportunities for complex statistical analyses, but they provided access to much larger sample sizes with more robust procedures for data collection than would otherwise have been possible.

## Results

### THE PROMINENCE OF REG

Of the 5451 schoolchildren aged 11-15 interviewed, 4491 (82%) said that they had seen poster adverts for cigarettes and mentioned several different brands (table I). In the areas where the Reg campaign ran (the north and north west of England, Yorkshire, and Humberside) advertising for the Regal brand was the second most prominent, being recalled (without examples of the campaign being shown) by 37% of young people. In other areas advertising for Regal was barely mentioned at all (2%). As the Reg campaign was the only major Regal advertising campaign taking place at this time, this impact was almost certainly attributable to it.

The qualitative research also showed that cigarette advertising in general, and the Reg campaign in particular, was well known to children. Reg was

TABLE I—Awareness of poster adverts for cigarettes among children aged 11-15 in 1993. Values are percentages\*

	In Reg campaign area (n=1646)	In rest of England (n=3805)	Total (n=5451)
Any cigarette advert	83	82	82
Brand advertised on poster:			
Benson and Hedges	39	45	43
Silk Cut	33	40	38
Regal	37	2	13
Marlboro	11	20	17
Superkings	16	17	17

\*From the Health Education Authority's teenage smoking tracking survey wave 6 (unpublished results).

TABLE II—Recognition of Reg adverts in area where Reg campaign ran. Values are percentages

Adverts recognised	Age group				
	5-10*		11-15†	15-65‡	
	All (n=437)	Ages 9-10 (n=145)	(n=1646)†	All (n=814)	Ages 35-55 (n=256)
	41	55	91	49	52

Data from Health Education Authority's surveys: \*Children's omnibus; †teenage smoking tracking survey wave 6; ‡adult omnibus. (All unpublished results.)

mentioned spontaneously in most of the groups before the respondents knew that the research concerned cigarette advertising. Most were able to recall at least one Reg advert at this point. The extent of recall varied by age and smoking status, with older respondents (aged 12-15) and smokers being able to remember more adverts and details than the 10-11 year old children and non-smokers. The initial advert, with its slogan, "I smoke 'em because my name's on 'em," was most commonly remembered.

Reg as a character was also familiar to the children. He was introduced into the discussion groups separately from and prior to the advertising, along with 20-30 other media characters. Most respondents were able to identify Reg with ease and quickly connected him with Regal cigarettes. Only those aged 10-11 displayed hesitancy (one or two even mispronounced his name, giving it a hard "g") and debated which brand of cigarettes he advertised. Even here, however, there was little doubt that Reg was involved in some form of cigarette advertising. When respondents were shown examples of the Reg adverts, they readily recognised not only the individual adverts but the campaign as a whole. The prompts also stimulated them to mention other examples of Reg adverts that were not presented and to describe where and when they had seen them.

The quantitative data confirmed this familiarity with Reg (table II). When young people in the Reg campaign area were shown an advert almost all 11-15 year olds recognised Reg; 91% said that they had seen it or a similar advert with Reg. Even with children aged 9-10, over half (55%) recognised the advert (63% among boys of this age).

Among the adults, awareness of Reg varied. In the qualitative research the 18-24 age group seemed almost as aware of it as the children, but the 35-55 age group were much less so. The quantitative data showed that awareness was much lower among those aged 35-55 than among teenagers; and barely half (52%) recognised Reg advertising when it was shown to them.

### ATTITUDES TO REG

Beyond its connection with selling cigarettes, children's understanding of the campaign varied by age and smoking status. The qualitative research showed that some of the non-smoking 12-15 year olds and almost all the 10-11 year olds were struggling to understand the creative content of the adverts, particularly the humour. Some children did not realise that the adverts were supposed to be funny, others did but could not get the joke.

"They named them after him. . . . It doesn't make sense." (Girl aged 10-11, non-smoker.)

"I hate they adverts 'cos most of them I don't get." (Girl aged 14-15, non-smoker.)

"Reg on public transport. . . . What's waiting at a bus stop got to do wi' anything about smoking?" (Boy aged 10-11, non-smoker.)

Many of these children felt cross and excluded. This typically led them to dismiss and reject the campaign as "daft" and "pointless."

"It frustrates you that you don't understand it." (Girl aged 14-15, non-smoker.)

"It bugs me." (Girl aged 10-11, non-smoker.)

"You think you're daft." (Girl aged 14-15, non-smoker.)

In contrast, many of the older and smoking respondents did understand the humour, and this contributed to their enjoyment of the campaign. The quantitative data confirmed the appeal of the campaign to smokers (table III). Among the 11-15 year olds who were aware of the campaign, smokers were more positive about it

TABLE III—Response to Reg adverts in area where Reg campaign ran among subjects aware of Reg. Values are percentages

	Age group				
	11-15*			15-65†	
	All (n=1534)	Smokers (n=236)	Non-smokers (n=1250)	All (n=409)	Ages 35-55 (n=133)
Expressed positive views about Reg	32	51	27	45	36
Thought Reg was a laugh	24	43	21	39	29
Did not understand Reg	21	15	23	34	37

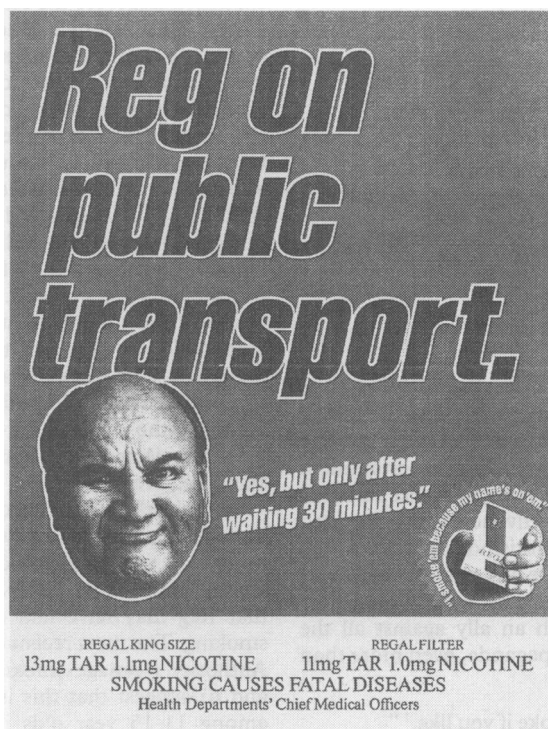
Data from Health Education Authority's surveys: \*teenage smoking tracking survey wave 6; †adult omnibus. (All unpublished results.)

than non-smokers (51% v 27%,  $P < 0.001$ ), were more likely to find it funny (43% v 21%,  $P < 0.001$ ), and less likely to say that they did not understand it (15% v 23%,  $P < 0.01$ ).

The quantitative research also showed that adults were at least ambivalent about Reg. Over a third (34%) of them said that they did not understand the adverts (compared with 15% of 11-15 year old smokers) and only 45% expressed any positive views about the advertising. The qualitative research suggested that the 18-24 age group understood the campaign in much the same way as the older children, but felt the "schoolboy" humour would appeal to people younger than them. They did not identify with the campaign. Adults aged 35-55 were unappreciative of it; they were mystified by the humour and did not identify with the campaign. Indeed, the men in this group argued that if it was aimed at them it was insulting and derogatory, portraying their age group as stupid and ignorant.

#### THE APPEAL OF REG

The qualitative research was able to define the nature of Reg's appeal to young smokers. In part this appeal was linked to the idea of branding, the means by which manufacturers add intangible qualities such as status and fashion to their products.<sup>4</sup> Advertising is recognised to play a key role in building these images.<sup>5</sup> Branding was clearly an important part of underage smoking. Almost all the children were aware of a wide range of different cigarette brands, and among the older smokers this awareness extended to familiarity. Respondents held strong opinions about acceptable and unacceptable brands and made extensive reference to peer influence on this acceptability.



Example of the Reg campaign

"I think you want to smoke what your pals are smoking." (Girl aged 12-13, smoker.)

"See the people we hang around with, see what they smoke. Everybody smokes the same." (Boy aged 14-15, smoker.)

"See at my school, they all smoke them [Regal and Club]. Well see if you smoke something different like Dunhill you would get a slagging, 'imagine smoking them.'" (Girl aged 12-13, smoker.)

Peer influence typically took the form of mockery and ridicule by friends if you smoked the "wrong" brand. Such treatment ("getting a slagging") was clearly something the young people sought hard to avoid. The influence that social acceptability could have on brand choice was illustrated by the reported behaviour of one respondent putting cigarettes of an unfashionable but cheap brand (Royals) into a fashionable packet (Kensitas Club). By far the most acceptable brands were Regal and Kensitas Club. Their image was ordinary and down to earth. When asked to describe the typical smoker of these brands, the respondents' comments included:

"Like me. Younger generation—hanging about the streets."

"Dead down to earth people."

"Could be either a boy or a girl."

"Just ordinary. Normal."

"He'd read *Viz*"

"He'd go on holiday to Spain." (Girls aged 14-15, smokers.)

Other brands tended to be rejected as too pretentious or down market.

"Rothmans is like sort of posh. They sponsor cars and all that. . . . You don't see Rothmans on the side of a corner shop do you?" (Boy aged 14-15, smoker.)

"[JPS Superkings] They're for old men who can nip them and come back to them later." (Girl aged 14-15, smoker.)

Among the adults, branding was much less of an issue. Although probably more aware of the different brands than the children, they were much less discriminatory in their taste. The older respondents in particular smoked a wide range of brands, switched brands quite regularly, and had virtually no sensitivity about being seen with the "wrong" brand.

Reg made his contribution to the Regal brand partly through humour. At least three aspects of the adverts were felt to be funny. Reg himself was amusing.

"He makes you laugh whenever you see him." (Boy aged 12-13, smoker.)

"He is cute. It's his wee cheeky smile, he's chubby." (Girl aged 14-15, smoker.)

The textural jokes were enjoyed, although there was often something of a love-hate reaction to them. The jokes were painfully bad, causing groans as often as laughter.

"You just laugh at them because they're so stupid." (Boy aged 12-13, smoker.)

"You laugh at them and mock them." (Girl aged 14-15, non-smoker.)

Importantly, however, they were the sort of joke the respondents themselves, or their friends, would crack.

"The sort of thing if you told it, you'd laugh at it yourself, thinking you were so funny—one of those things you laugh at no one else laughs with you." (Girl aged 14-15, smoker.)

Finally, the layout and design of the advert also caused laughter.

"It shows you his face an' then it shows you his hands over there. . . . The way they match his hand size up wi' his body size. His head's away out there an' his hands about that size." (Boy aged 12-13, smoker.)

As well as his humour these respondents also liked Reg's attitude. He continually ridiculed serious issues such as the ERM (exchange rate mechanism), the greenhouse effect, and politics. These were matters that adults, and their parents and teachers in particular, treated seriously but which they delighted in mocking and undermining. Reg joined them in this game, showing empathy for their values.

"They're [ERM, etc] things like people are worried about—things they've been talking about—folk are worried about that and he jokes about it."

"Would you be worried about things like that?" (Interviewer)

"Oh naw! It's older people like parents and that . . . taxes and politics." (Girl aged 14-15, smoker.)

This flippancy also appealed because it had a levelling effect, safeguarding the children from feeling inferior by mocking those who claimed to be knowledgeable or intelligent. In this way it mirrored their own use of a slugging as a means of social control.

Reg's attitude had one further attraction. One of the serious issues he mocked was antismoking. When he said, "I smoke 'em because my name's on 'em," he was implying that you did not have to have a good reason for smoking, you did not have to justify yourself. This struck a welcome chord with youngsters, who felt increasingly persecuted for smoking. Again Reg was transmitting empathetic messages to young people.

"It's as if he's trying to say like if he smokes them for a stupid reason, what's your reason?" (Girl aged 14-15, smoker.)

The combination of his humour and attitudes made it easy for the young smokers to identify with the Reg campaign. When 14-15 year old female smokers were asked to describe the campaign as a person they found this easy to do and saw this person as a man aged 18-20 who might take them out and who would be fun, fairly ordinary, and make bad jokes. In short, much like the boys they already knew.

"Someone that's down to earth."

"A good-time person, know what I mean, take you out 'n' that, make you laugh."

"18 to 20, something like that."

"Take you for a drink to the pub or something."

"A Vic [a reference to *EastEnders*] where he knows everyone and you don't."

"You sit there like that, and he'll stand there like that in front of you."

"Standing, leaning on the bar."

"He'll say something witty and he'll start laughing and you'll look at him."

"It's not funny funny, it's funny stupid."

The Reg campaign was also appealing because it was non-directive. Adolescents, even more than the rest of the population, do not like being told what to do. The campaign was described as putting entertainment before persuasion and being broader than just a normal cigarette advert. This non-directiveness was contrasted with the approach taken by antismoking advertising, which did not give the audience any options, was overt about its meaning, and was seldom entertaining. Reg provided the adolescents with an ally against all the antismoking pressure and propaganda, even more than other cigarette advertising.

"These adverts are saying 'smoke if you like.'"

## Public health implications

- The advertising campaign for Regal cigarettes that featured the character Reg was recently withdrawn
- The campaign was considered to have broken the voluntary agreement that tobacco advertising must not appeal to children more than to adults
- This study showed that young adolescents, especially smokers, enjoyed the adverts and found Reg amusing
- In contrast, adults aged 35-55 (the supposed target group for the campaign) were unappreciative of the adverts
- The Advertising Standards Authority's decision to withdraw the Reg campaign seems to have been appropriate

"It's like revenge, like you're getting back on them saying to you 'Don't smoke.' . . . You feel you're allowed to then, when you see that." (Girls aged 14-15, smokers.)

Finally, Reg made the smokers feel special. They were being targeted by big and powerful organisations and could share in the campaign in a way that non-smokers could not.

"If you were not a smoker you wouldn't know them, but because you are and you're used to seeing them all the time you know what they are. . . . It's because you smoke you know what they are and you recognise them." (Girl aged 14-15, smoker.)

"I used to go around in my dad's car when I was going out. I used to look for all the posters and that to see if there was a new one out. I used to follow all the stories." (Boy aged 12-13, smoker.)

## Discussion

The Reg campaign caught the attention of children more effectively than it did that of adults. For example, 91% of 11-15 year olds recognised the Reg adverts compared with only 52% of those aged 35-55, the supposed target for the campaign. Part of this disparity can be explained by a general tendency for children to be more aware than adults of all advertising. However, this is unlikely to provide a complete explanation, particularly given the body of evidence, summarised by Smee,<sup>1</sup> that cigarette advertising is disproportionately effective with young smokers. The campaign also held most appeal to teenagers, particularly smokers aged 14-15. They enjoyed its humour and its mockery of serious issues, including smoking. They clearly identified with it, and this identification probably transferred to the brand. Certainly Regal were one of only two brands that they smoked and found acceptable. It was seen to be young, ordinary, and streetwise. The Reg campaign also gave young smokers a non-directive and complimentary license to smoke. In contrast, the campaign's supposed target age group (35-55) rejected Reg, finding him difficult to understand and even offensive.

This clearly contravened the voluntary code governing tobacco advertising, which states that advertising must not appeal to children more than it does to adults.<sup>2</sup> In the light of the Smee report<sup>1</sup> it also suggests that Reg may have had a direct impact on teenage smoking. The most recent data of the Health Education Authority (teenage smoking tracking survey waves 5 and 6) suggest that this is possible. Regular smoking among 11-15 year olds increased from 8% to 10%

between 1992 and 1993 ( $P < 0.05$ ) in the north of England, where Reg was prominent, and remained stable at 7% in the south, where he did not appear. This change could, of course, be due to other factors, but it is not unlikely that the Regal campaign made a substantial contribution to this apparent increase. In view of these findings the Advertising Standards Authority's decision to withdraw the Reg campaign would seem appropriate.

We thank the respondents and schools for their cooperation,

all the researchers for their hard work, and the Health Education Authority for its support and encouragement.

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## Smoking and death: the past 40 years and the next 40

Richard Peto

See papers on pp 901 and 911

Smoking already kills about two million people a year in developed countries, half in middle age (35-69) and half in old age.<sup>1,2</sup> This number is still increasing as the death rate among women increases and populations grow larger and older (fig 1). Already smoking accounts for one sixth of the 11 million adult deaths each year in these populations. There are 1.2 billion people living in developed countries. If one sixth of their deaths continue to be caused by tobacco about 200 million of the adults and children now living in developed countries will eventually be killed by tobacco, and about 100 million of these will die while still in middle age.<sup>2</sup>

In developing countries there has recently been a large increase in the number of young men smoking. People in China, for example, now smoke about 30% of the world's cigarettes. This will have catastrophic effects next century as most other causes of death are likely to continue to decrease and the effects of tobacco to increase. If current smoking patterns persist—that is, if the smoking uptake rate among young adults continues to be substantial and the rate of stopping smoking at older ages continues to be low—by the time the children of today reach middle age smoking will be one of the largest causes of premature death in the world.

Over the next 40 years the annual number of deaths from tobacco will increase from about three million to more than 10 million (table I),<sup>2</sup> yet 40 years ago the hazards were only just beginning to be recognised. The United Kingdom's Medical Research Council (MRC) supported much of the early research, and in 1957 it was the first national institution in the world to accept

TABLE I—Annual deaths attributed to tobacco in 1995 and in about 2025<sup>2</sup>

	Estimated annual No of deaths (millions)	
	1995	2025*
Developed countries	2	3
Developing countries	1	7
World total	3	10

\*These numbers are inevitably approximate, but if present smoking patterns persist the chief uncertainty is merely when some such total will be seen: perhaps in about the mid-2020s, perhaps in the next decade.<sup>2</sup>

formally the evidence that tobacco is a major cause of death.

### Evidence against smoking

In 1947 the MRC had called a conference to discuss the rapid increase in deaths in the United Kingdom attributed to lung cancer. Part of the increase was known to be an artefact of the improvements in the accuracy of death certificates that had resulted from better diagnostic methods. But since the increase was much steeper in men than in women changes in the real disease rates must also have occurred. Austin Bradford Hill had recently taken over as director of the MRC's Statistical Research Unit at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and one of his new recruits was Richard Doll. They began a large "case-control" study in 1948 in which the life histories of several hundred patients with lung cancer were compared with those of several hundred people without the disease.

Cigarette smoking was only one of several possible causes being investigated. (Doll himself originally thought the increase in cars and the tarring of the roads were more likely to be to blame.) But the results of this first study proved otherwise. The only big difference between those who had lung cancer and those who did not was that almost all those with lung cancer had been smokers. Doll and Bradford Hill published their results in the *BMJ* in 1950, and in the same year a parallel study by Wynder and Graham in the United States had independently reached similar conclusions.<sup>3,4</sup> This was the first clear evidence that smoking is a major cause of death.

Once it was shown that smoking was a cause of most deaths from lung cancer, the next step was to establish prospective studies in which people were first asked what they smoked and then followed for several years to monitor deaths not only from lung cancer but also from other causes. Parallel studies were again established independently in Britain and the United States.<sup>5,6</sup> The British study evolved into the first major

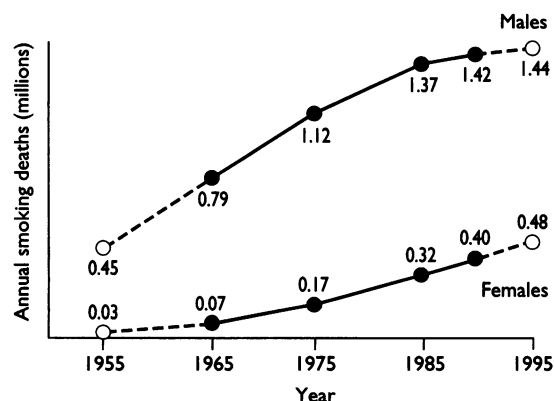


FIG 1—Annual number of deaths attributed to tobacco in developed countries. If current smoking patterns continue, when the children of today reach middle age the annual number of deaths will have increased from 2 million to about 3 million, but in less developed countries the increase will be far larger, from about 1 million to about 7 million in about 2025, leading to a world total of about 10 million deaths a year from tobacco<sup>2</sup>

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