



Carcinogen-in-a-Can

Charlotte Gray's article "Secondhand-smoke story goes up in flames" (*CMAJ* 1998;158[9]:1178-80) demonstrated how entirely debased the pro-smoking lobby can be, and it also outlined the problems that can arise when scientific reasoning is applied to what is primarily an ethical problem. To demonstrate just how unsound arguments in favour of smoking in public can be, complete the following simple thought experiment.

Imagine finding a novel carcinogen that at modest levels clearly, in the words of the tobacco industry, is only "associated" with lung cancer in animals and humans when inhaled as an aerosol. Reduce the concentration down a notch or two, and then package the carcinogen in an inert and harmless base in an aerosol container. This new product can be marketed as Carcinogen-in-a-Can (CIAC).

It is simple to use the product. When people near you light up, simply whip out your CIAC and spray it liberally in their direction, providing the necessary reassurance that although the agent has been associated with lung cancer in rats and humans, studies to date have not conclusively demonstrated that the agent causes cancer when inhaled at low levels. In the event that low levels are shown to be harmful, you can simply reduce the concentration of the product, arguing once again that it is now safe.

It is possible that the smokers near you will be upset by your apparently thoughtless and self-centred behaviour, but they will undoubtedly be relieved to hear that this senseless and ill-mannered act gives you substantial enjoyment. (The more individuals who use CIAC, the more acceptable its use will become.)

To argue that smokers should have a "right" to expose others to a known

carcinogen simply to satisfy their desire for a cigarette defies any system of ethical reasoning. In a civilized society, the ability of any individual to interfere with the well-being of another stops at the skin — which is why there never has been and never will be a rational argument in favour of smokers having a widespread right to smoke in public.

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Secondhand smoke and cancer: Where's the proof?

In her desire to refute a *Daily Telegraph* article that claimed secondhand smoke was noncarcinogenic, Charlotte Gray resorted to hyperbole in her own article, "Secondhand-smoke story goes up in flames" (*CMAJ* 1998;158[9]:1178-80). Some of the inferences that Victoria MacDonald drew from a World Health Organization (WHO) study were unjustified, but to say that she has "no understanding of scientific practices" appears manifestly untrue, if the subsequent rebuttal that appeared in the Mar. 15, 1998, issue of the *Sunday Telegraph* is any indication.

Gray describes the WHO study as a small, run-of-the-mill study involving exposure to secondhand smoke that consisted mostly of tobacco-lobby spin and a lot of egregious mistakes. To our knowledge, the study has not been published. How does Gray know about the egregious mistakes? Has she checked the statistics? [On Mar. 9, the WHO released the following statement: "In February 1998, in accordance with usual scientific practice, a paper reporting the main study results was sent to a reputable scientific journal for consideration and peer review. That is why the full report is not yet publicly available. Under the circumstances, however, the authors have agreed to make an abstract available to the media." WHO also said that the media — the *Daily Telegraph* — had "completely misrepresented" the study and its results. —Ed.]

Our impression of the WHO and its published studies and statements is that they are carefully considered and contain sound science, although they sometimes lapse into "bureaucratic." In the study, the relative risk (RR) of a nonsmoker who lives in a house with a smoker was given as 1.16, with confidence intervals of 0.093 to 1.44. Thus, it is entirely possible that the RR would be less than that expected — below 1.0 — but it also could be appreciably higher than