tobacco advertising

After three editors in its first 63 years, the MJA had four different editors between 1977 and 1983 when Dr Alister Brass took over. His editorial, published below, caused a stir, with one letter writer describing it as “probably the most contemptible piece of commentary ever to have disgraced the pages of a medical journal with pretensions to responsibility.”

Smoke gets in your eyes

There is not a child or adult in Australia who does not know that smoking is bad. The rising chorus of warnings that has poured from every medical, health, government and educational source since the first official pronouncement on the matter in 1964 by the American Surgeon General has ensured that the news is now ubiquitous.

Yet for all the sound and fury, and the dire pronouncements of the experts, kids still start to smoke, and adults (including doctors) still enjoy smoke, and adults (including doctors) still enjoy smoking, bad conscience or not. How can this be?

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These are the basic human instincts (a) to be dangerously attracted to the unknown or untried; (b) to grasp any remedy, even a potentially dangerous one like nicotine, to assuage the anxieties of the daily grind; and (c) to use the sharing of tobacco as a means to easy, non-verbal communion.

The sociological subtext is clear: if you’re lighting up, or actually smoking, then you are too busy to stab, shoot or otherwise attack the person you’re smoking with.

Further, as the ABC’s science expert, Robyn Williams, points out, the whole health movement, of which denouncing tobacco is just one facet, is a middle- and upper-class phenomenon, another fashion in the trend of “the fitness drives, the image of the slim jogger, the Balmain museli-eaters, the fibre-conscious-stool-watchers”.

Reformers need to be very careful that they don’t crush an individual’s right (to be foolish, even) in the name of “higher truth”. So why not simply keep the medical facts on smoking in the public eye, but cut out the self-righteous wowsersim?

Life itself, as many have remarked, is a terminal illness. Anyone for a smoke?

Alister Brass, Editor
14 April 1984 (edited extract)