EDITORIAL

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Editor

Success Is in the Eye of the Beholder

For some years now, I have considered nominating the state of California for the ONS Public Service Award. No other state has been as aggressive in its efforts to protect its citizens from the dangers of cigarette smoking. Now, in what is perhaps the best evidence of the tobacco companies' efforts, comes word that they are suing California over its strong and creative antismoking advertising campaigns. Anyone who has spent time in California in the past few years undoubtedly has seen some of these state-produced ads. Intended to change public perceptions about tobacco use, these ads have appeared primarily as public service announcements on television and on billboards. They are sometimes irreverent, often poignant, and occasionally humorous. They are always aggressive and very effective. Since they began appearing after passage of a state initiative in 1988, adult smoking rates are down more than 30%, California's youth smoking rates are the lowest in the nation at 6.9%, and per capita consumption of cigarettes has been reduced by 60%. Just as striking is the fact that the ads have managed to convince large numbers of Californians that tobacco companies cannot be relied on to tell the truth. Ironically, the money to fund this ad campaign comes from a rather hefty tax on tobacco products.

As a Californian and an oncology nurse, I have been very proud of these efforts. Every time I travel to another state, I notice that none comes close to offering its citizens the same degree of protection from unwanted secondhand smoke. We have been spoiled.

The tobacco companies' suit charges that the ad campaign violates their first amendment rights. If the tobacco companies are to be believed, the ads are untrue and poisoning a potential jury pool should tobacco-related cases come to trial. Company lawyers call the ads nasty and personal and bemoan that the companies have no recourse to counter the ads. California is not the only state being sued, but California has arguably the largest and most successful antitobacco campaign, one that I am sure other states would like to use as a model. Once again, we find the tobacco companies double-talking while the American public, indeed the world, battles the serious health and environmental risks that come from the production and use of this scourge of a product.

I say, when it comes to tobacco, all bets are off. The tobacco companies cannot have it both ways. They cannot be free to advertise cigarettes as being cool, sexy, and safe, flying in the face of the findings of a huge portfolio of scientific research, and then yell "foul" when antismoking efforts use the same weapons (i.e., slick advertising) against them. They cannot conduct their own, much better financed campaigns to influence public perception in their favor and then try to hide behind the U.S. Constitution when educational campaigns inform the public about the dangers of smoking and the unsavory tactics of tobacco companies to protect their profits. Try as they might, they cannot mitigate the evils of promoting tobacco sales with corporate diversification into safe food markets or by touting their own mild-mannered antismoking campaigns. The American public is smart enough to recognize important messages even when they are couched in exaggerated terms. Potential jury pools should be exposed to both sides of an issue at trial. Whatever sensibilities they bring to their duty as jury members should be examined in the jury selection process. An educated public serves the process well.

In the meantime, we can be heartened that some strategies do work in our fight against tobacco use. Aggressive advertising and educational campaigns, tough laws governing tobacco sales and use, product taxes, and a variety of smoking cessation programs all have contributed to the successful reductions in the use and appeal of tobacco. This eventually will lead to reductions in the many health-related consequences of smoking—a verdict we all can applaud.

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