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Byrd's Eye View
A Public Service Column by
Senator Robert C. Byrd

SMOKING

The use of tobacco in its various forms--burning, dipping, or chewing--has had its bitter critics from the time European explorers acquired the habit from American Indians to the present day.

These included King James I of England, who in 1604 tried to outlaw smoking, claiming the practice irritated the nose, caused harm to the brain, and posed a dangerous threat to the lungs. Three and a half centuries later, the U. S. Public Health Service has entered the arena to do battle against the health-damaging plant, and, in so doing, issued a report in January of last year which proved very nearly all of King James' charges against tobacco are dismayingly true.

The report to the Surgeon General, from his Advisory Committee on Smoking and Health, carefully understated in summary, "Cigarette smoking is a health hazard of sufficient importance in the United States to warrant appropriate remedial action." This summary--based on painstaking scientific studies on smoking and its effect on health--is being used by PHS as a basis for continuing research and action. Realizing the enormity of the need to know more of the "how" and "why" of the damage caused by cigarette smoking and other tobacco uses, the Public Health Service last July awarded contracts totaling \$300,000 to support research on the properties of cigarette smoke and its effect on living tissues and in August, 1964, ten grants aggregating \$260,000 to support studies relating to the effects of cigarette smoking on health, including one to gather more accurate data on American smoking habits.

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But this Federal agency is not alone in the battle against the use of tobacco--the causative factor which it believes far outweighs all others in advancing lung cancer in the U. S. to the point that 43,000 persons died of it in 1963, a total death rate ten times higher than in 1930. Last July, twelve national agencies and organizations formed the National Interagency Council on Smoking and Health "to develop and implement effective plans and programs aimed at combating smoking as a health hazard." These included the American Association of School Administrators; Am. Cancer Society; Am. Dental Association; Am. Heart Association; Am. Public Health Association; Assn. of State and Territorial Health Officers; National Congress of Parents and Teachers; National Tuberculosis Association; U. S. Office of Education; U. S. Children's Bureau; and the Dept. of Classroom Teachers.

But the fight will not be quickly or easily won, a fact well realized by the attackers. The smoking habit is deeply rooted in American culture and, as one PHS psychologist points out, based on a calculation that the average pack-a-day smoker takes about 60,000 puffs a year, "There is nothing else the individual does so often or so regularly except breathe. How can he help but be hooked on a habit that he has practiced so long and so well?"

Education to a certain grim fact may be the best tool--that the overall death rate is, in a given age group among Americans, 70 percent higher for smokers than non-smokers. Cigarette smoking is thus clearly indicted not only as a lung or heart problem, but also as a general health hazard. Old jokes about cigarettes as "coffin nails" are perhaps not so funny when repeated in relation to present date mortality tables.