

CIGARETTE MAKERS DISPUTE REPORTS ON ADDICTIVENESS

TESTIMONY TO CONGRESS

Executives of Top Companies Seek to Counter Growing Tide Against Smoking

By PHILIP J. HILTS
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 14 — The chief executives of the top seven American tobacco companies testified in Congress today that they did not believe that cigarettes were addictive, but that they would rather their own children did not smoke.

The executives, sitting side by side at a conference table in what seemed to many a counterpoint to the growing antismoking sentiment in Congress, faced more than six hours of sharp questioning by members of the House Subcommittee on Health and the Environment. The executives agreed to give Congress extensive research on humans and animals that their companies had done concerning nicotine and addiction.

While working hard to deny that their companies controlled the amount of nicotine in cigarettes to keep their customers addicted, the executives made a number of unusual admissions along the way, among them:

¶ That cigarette makers can control the amount of nicotine in cigarettes by altering the blends of tobacco, but they said they use these blends for flavor, not addiction.

¶ That cigarettes may cause lung cancer and heart disease and other health problems.

¶ That a Philip Morris study on addiction had been suppressed, despite repeated denials in the past that this was the case.

¶ That they would prefer that their children not smoke.

The hearing, held in a crowded Congressional hearing room, was televised live by cable broadcasters, as the overflow crowd stood or sat in the hallways of the Rayburn House Office Building for what several members of Congress said was a historic moment marking a "high tide" of antismoking sentiment.

The executives seemed to agree, saying that they were besieged and that the sweep of the antitobacco feeling in recent months had made them fear that attempts to ban cigarettes altogether would be made.

What the "antitobacco industry wants is prohibition," said James W. Johnston, chairman and chief executive of R.J. Reynolds. "We hear about the addiction and the threat. If cigarettes are too dangerous to be sold, then ban them. Some smokers will obey the law, but many will not. People will be selling cigarettes out of the trunks of cars, cigarettes made by who knows who, made of who knows what."

Among the most significant statements by the executives were those that confirmed that tobacco companies could control the amount of nicotine in cigarettes by changing which types of tobacco and which parts of those plants were included in the blend. They said that a number of their cigarettes, primarily low-tar brands, did use high-nicotine blends, which gave more nicotine to the smoker than the cigarettes might have otherwise given. They use these blends for flavor, they explained.

Among other statements were the admission from Philip Morris' President and chief executive, William I. Campbell, that his company's officials had suppressed a scientific paper just before publication, and an apology from Mr. Johnston of Reynolds for a Joe Camel advertisement. The ad, recommending ways for young men to get dates, suggested that they drag women from the water at the beach, pretending to save them from drowning.

"That ad ran once," he said. "It never should have run. I apologize. It was offensive. It was stupid. We do make mistakes."

The admissions even reached the point of commercial indiscretion when Mr. Campbell of Philip Morris was asked whether it was possible to make cigarettes whose capacity for starting fires was greatly reduced, and whether company objections that such cigarettes would be too hard to draw and would taste bad were borne out. The Virginia Slims brand is among the most safe, Mr. Wyden said, asking if Virginia Slims were too hard to smoke.

"As a matter of fact, it is too hard to smoke, and doesn't taste very good," snapped Mr. Campbell. He said the company had been unable to make a commercially acceptable and fire-safe cigarette.

Pressed by the committee's chairman, Henry Waxman, Democrat of California, and by Representatives Ron Wyden, Democrat of Oregon, and Mike Synar, Democrat of Oklahoma, the companies agreed to supply many private company papers, including all the research on humans and animals on nicotine and addiction, and all the market research and internal memoranda on Reynolds' Joe Camel advertising campaign, and all the research done by the Philip Morris researcher whose scientific paper on addiction was blocked from publication by company executives.

At one point during the hearing, Mr. Wyden presented a stack of data from the 1989 Surgeon General's report on smoking and other government and medical groups, asking each executive in turn if he believed that cigarettes were addictive. Each answered no.

When Mr. Johnston said that all products, from cola to Twinkies, had risks associated with them, Mr. Waxman replied, "Yes, but the difference between cigarettes and Twinkies is death."

"How many smokers die each year from cancer?" Mr. Waxman asked Mr. Johnston.

"I do not know how many," he replied, adding that estimates of death are "generated by computers and are only statistical."

Mr. Waxman asked, "Does smoking cause heart disease?"

"It may," Mr. Johnston said.

"Does it cause lung cancer?"

"It may."

"Emphysema?"

"It may."

The list continued through several other ailments. Mr. Waxman asked Andrew H. Tisch, the chairman and chief executive of the Lorillard Tobacco Company whether he knew that cigarettes caused cancer. "I do not believe that," Mr. Tisch answered.

"Do you understand how isolated you are from the scientific community in your belief?" Mr. Waxman asked.

"I do, sir," said Mr. Tisch.

Although each executive with children said he would prefer that his own children not smoke, several added that they would give no advice to their children but let them decide on their own.

Earlier this year the Food and Drug Administration said that it believed that it had the authority to regulate cigarettes as drugs if it could be shown that they were addictive and that the companies intentionally controlled the amount of nicotine in cigarettes to maintain their addictive potential. David Kessler, the agency commissioner, said there was already much evidence on the first point and some evidence showing that the companies purposely maintained nicotine levels in cigarettes. Today's hearings were partly a response to his request that Congress debate the matter and give the agency guidance before the F.D.A. took action.

A bill has also been introduced in Congress to regulate tobacco sales and cigarette composition, while another bill would ban cigarette smoking in all buildings nationwide that were visited by more than 10 people per week. That bill gained surprising support from the chain restaurant trade association, whose members would have to ban smoking in their businesses.

In his testimony, Mr. Campbell of Philip Morris admitted stopping publication of a study showing that animals would press bars repeatedly to get nicotine, the sort of study that is key to proving that a drug is addictive. He also agreed to waive the secrecy agreement that has kept the researcher, Dr. Victor DeNoble, from testifying about his work.

A Lorillard executive, Dr. Alexander Spears, admitted, when pressed in the hearing, that data that he gave to Congress three weeks ago showing a drop in the amount of nicotine in cigarettes since 1982 was wrong. The chart he presented then before the same subcommittee showed a 10 percent drop in nicotine, when in fact the Surgeon General's report from which that data were taken showed an increase of the total nicotine in cigarettes by more than 10 percent.

Asked after the hearing how the error was made, Dr. Spears said, "I don't know."

Senior F.D.A. officials and strong opponents of tobacco in Congress

have said that they do not want to ban cigarettes completely, but would rather find some way to regulate them to lessen their hazards. Some tobacco company executives, who asked not to be named said privately that they could accept some regulation. This hearing, they said, after a battering spring, may be the opening of a discussion about a new and different future for cigarettes in the U.S.

Among the possibilities suggested by F.D.A. officials, members of Congress and tobacco company executives were limits on the amounts of nicotine and tar that would be permitted in cigarettes, stricter control over the distribution of cigarettes, and efforts to reduce other hazards, like fire safety and secondhand tobacco smoke.

It is unclear how much sentiment there will be for such moves in Congress, but a vote later this year on Mr. Waxman's bill to limit smoking in public places is to be considered by the same House Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, a committee that includes many members from tobacco-producing states and several members who are swing votes. Its fate may indicate the strength of the sentiment for reform, Congressional aides said.

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THE INDUSTRY

Tobacco Companies on the Stand

Tobacco companies whose executives testified before Congress yesterday, with their parent companies and major brands.

Philip Morris U.S.A. The Philip Morris Companies. Marlboro, Benson & Hedges, Merit, Virginia Slims, Bristol, Bucks, Players, Cambridge, Parliament, Saratoga, Philip Morris, Basic.

R.J. Reynolds Tobacco U.S.A. R.J.R. Nabisco Inc. Winston, Salem, Camel, Doral, Magna, Vantage, More, NOW, Monarch, Best Value, Century, Sterling.

U.S. Tobacco Company UST Inc. Copenhagen and Skoal smokeless tobacco.

Lorillard Tobacco Company Loews Corporation. Brands include True, Kent, Newport, Old Gold, Spring, Triumph, Max 120's, Satin.

Liggett Group Inc. Grand Metropolitan P.L.C. Eve, Lark, L & M, Chesterfield.

Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation B.A.T. Industries. Barclay, Belair, Kool, Raleigh, Richland, Viceroy.

American Tobacco Company American Brands Inc. Carlton, Lucky Strike, Pall Mall, Tareyton, American, Malibu, Misty, Montclair, Riviera, Prime, Private Stock, Silva Thins, Summit.

Tobacco Chiefs Identified

Pictured on page 1, from left to right, are these top executives of the seven leading American tobacco companies:

- Donald S. Johnston, president and chief executive of American Tobacco Company
- Thomas Sandelur Jr., chairman and chief executive of Brown and William Tobacco Corporation
- Edward Horrigan, chairman and chief executive of Liggett Group Inc.
- Andrew Tisch, chief executive Lorillard Tobacco Company
- Joseph Taddeo, president of United States Tobacco Company
- James W. Johnston, chief executive of R. J. Reynolds
- William I. Campbell, chief executive of Philip Morris



Reuters



Associated Press



Reuters

For the first time the heads of the seven major American tobacco makers appeared together at a Congressional hearing, and they said they did not think that cigarettes were addictive. Three of the executives yesterday before the House Subcommittee on Health and the Environment are, from left, James W. Johnston of R. J. Reynolds, William I. Campbell of Philip Morris and Andrew Tisch of the Lorillard Tobacco Company.

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