

Change in smoking habits in a general practice

SHEILA HANDEL, M.R.C.G.P.
London

*'Cigaretts will spoil yer life
Ruin yer health and kill yer baby'*

Aims

In the summer of 1970 I felt it would be interesting to follow-up patients in my practice and to record any change in their smoking habits, in an attempt to determine the possible effectiveness of a general practitioner in stopping smoking.

Between June 1970 and March 1971, 100 patients were recruited. The patients were smokers with whom I had had no previous discussion of their smoking habits. Patients were not chosen strictly at random but where time and opportunity for discussion arose.

The patients consulted me for the following reasons:

Respiratory infections	..	..	31
Cardiovascular disease	..	..	4
All other reasons	..	..	61
Accompanying other patients	..	..	4

Method

The discussion took place in ordinary surgery hours in which eight patients an hour are booked. It is therefore unlikely that any discussion took longer than seven minutes.

The content of the discussion varied according to my assessment of what might influence them and was in appropriate cases related to their illness. An attempt was made to probe the reason why the patient smoked. If this was related to anxiety there was some discussion of this. The health hazards were emphasised and the financial burden. Occasionally (five times in all) a tranquilliser was prescribed. No special literature or questionnaires were used.

Follow-up was continued for one year. Each patient was asked "How many cigarettes a day to you smoke now?" either when the patient came to surgery or by postal enquiry. No further attempt to discuss the hazards of smoking was made unless initiated by the patient.

The age and sex distribution of patients is shown in Table 1. Since the smokers in the study were not chosen at random they have been compared with 100 consecutive smokers seen in January 1972 and not included in the study. This is also shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
AGE AND SEX DISTRIBUTION OF PATIENTS IN STUDY AND 100 CONSECUTIVE SMOKERS

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
	<i>Under 30</i>		<i>30-49</i>		<i>Over 50</i>	
Study	11	22	14	18	20	15
Consecutive series	4	22	10	28	16	20

Results

The number of cigarettes smoked at recruitment is shown in Table 2, and it will be seen that those who stopped or reduced smoking were not confined to the groups smoking less cigarettes but were represented among those smoking 30 a day or more.

TABLE 2
CHANGE IN SMOKING HABITS

	<i>Number of cigarettes smoked per day</i>							
	<i>0-9</i>		<i>10-19</i>		<i>20-29</i>		<i>30 and over</i>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Study	1	—	14	24	14	25	16	6
Stopped	1	—	5	4	4	1	6	1
Reduced 50 per cent	—	—	1	5	3	7	4	1

TABLE 3
AGE AND SEX OF PATIENTS REDUCING SMOKING BY 50 PER CENT OR MORE

	<i>Under 30</i>		<i>30-39</i>		<i>50 and over</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	
Numbers in study	11	22	14	18	20	15	100
Stopped smoking	3	5	6	1	8	0	
Reduced by more than 50 per cent	1	4	3	3	5	5	
Stopped or reduced by 50 per cent	4	9	9	4	13	5	44

Table 3 shows the age and sex distribution of those who stopped or reduced smoking compared with the numbers and distribution in the study.

Discussion

In this predominantly working-class practice, a variety of patients were advised to stop smoking during the course of normal surgery hours and with an appointment system operating. In general, patients were receptive to the ideas put forward by the doctor and none refused to co-operate. One weakness of the study is the lack of random selection of patients included as they were selected as the time and opportunity arose. They were compared with 100 consecutive smokers attending surgery. This showed 45 per cent of men in the study compared with 30 per cent in the consecutive series.

Success in stopping patients smoking was not related to age and sex although more men stopped smoking than women. Women in this study seemed more difficult to influence.

Summary

Routine general-practice patients were advised to stop smoking and after one year 37 per cent of the men and 11 per cent of the women stopped, and 20 per cent of the men and 21 per cent of the women reduced by more than half.

Acknowledgement

I wish to acknowledge all the help and encouragement given to me by Dr Keith Ball, F.R.C.P. and by *Action on Smoking and Health*.