

TOBACCO RELATED DISEASES*

R. Doll, R. Gray, R. Peto, K. Wheatley

ICRF Cancer Studies Unit, Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford, UK

Abstract

The historical association between smoking and human pathology is reviewed. The evidence for such an association is discussed in terms of the three main types of disease related to smoking – cancer, vascular disease and respiratory disease. Other, less well established relationships are also covered briefly as well as diseases reduced in incidence among smokers.

Key words: Cancer, vascular disease, respiratory disease

Introduction

When, shortly after the end of the Second World War, reasons began to be sought for the increase in the mortality attributed to lung cancer that was occurring in most of the developed world, there was, if anything, less awareness of the possible ill effects of smoking than there had been 50 years earlier. For the spread of the cigarette habit, which was as entrenched among male health workers as among the rest of the male population, had so dulled the collective sense that the possibility of tobacco being the culprit was given only scant attention.

That smoking might cause cancer of the lip had been recognised at least as early as 1795, when Sömmering pointed out that "Carcinoma of the lip is most frequent when people indulged in tobacco pipes. For the lower lip is particularly attacked by carcinoma because it is compressed between the pipe and the teeth" and by the latter half of the nineteenth century many experienced surgeons believed that smoking might also cause cancer of the tongue [1]. In both cases,

however, the effect was thought to be the result of thermal trauma from the stems of pipes and the only diseases that were attributed directly to tobacco in medical texts in the English language were tobacco angina (that is, attacks of angina brought on by smoking, which are certainly rare) and tobacco amblyopia (that is, blindness produced by heavy smoking, which is also rare and probably occurs only in combination with severe malnutrition).

That so little attention should have been paid to the possible effects of smoking is not really so surprising as it may now seem. For although tobacco had been in use for over 300 years, it had mostly been used as snuff, chewed, or smoked in pipes. Very little had been smoked in cigarettes and the other ways in which tobacco had been used were much less hazardous because smoke was not inhaled. Cigarettes, moreover, had become common only at the beginning of the twentieth century, and two of their main effects took many years to produce:

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Address correspondence to Sir Richard Doll, ICRF Cancer Studies Unit, Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford OX2 6HE, UK.

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