Smoke without fire ploy

☐ Mr Robertson   ☐ Professor Witorsch

A PASSIVE smoking conference was held in Sydney this week. The Tobacco Institute invited worldwide speakers, who swore impartiality, to address journalists flown from all over Australia to attend. GAIL WILLIAMS, one of those invited, describes how the tobacco industry presented its case.

WHAT started as a little pimple on the healthy, fat bottom of the tobacco industry has developed into a huge malignant growth.

The unobtrusive spot developed with the introduction of the "hazard" warning on cigarette packages.

But the industry was still sitting pretty even when that lump grew in to the subsequent "danger" warning on all packets, the removal of cigarette advertising from TV and the inclusion of the danger warning in all cigarette advertising.

The tobacco industry maintained an optimistic outlook and began pouring money into sponsoring sporting events and concert tours. Their promotions budget soared from $61,000 in 1984 to $136,000 in 1985.

But the kiss of almost certain death for the industry was given by the Attorney-General in one little statement in the House of Representatives on November 18 last year:

"... injury from passive smoking is reasonably foreseeable and that consequently such an injury could give rise to an action for damages at common law."

Defeat

He may as well have said: "You have terminal cancer. We don't know how long you'll live."

Still the industry refuses to accept defeat, even though seven Australian workers' compensation cases for injury due to passive smoking have already been settled, involving payouts of up to $26,000.

It came back fighting like cancer patients, taking the attitude their disease is all in the mind.

The tobacco industry has support in the fact there is little sentiment for an outright ban on smoking in public gathering places, but the anti-smoking forces are convincing non-smokers their health is at stake, too.

How do you argue with studies that conclude the average lung cancer risk to the passive smoker could be increased by 50-100 per cent over that of the true unexposed non-smoker?

Or the suggestion that an office worker sharing a room with a smoker could inhale the equivalent of five cigarettes a day in smoke particles, which include many carcinogens?

When you are the tobacco industry, and your livelihood depends on cigarette sales, you develop an antidote by calling a conference on passive smoking.

You choose an exciting location — Sydney —

Warning labels a sales hazard

invite journalists from all over Australia and wine and dine them at the Regent, reportedly one of the top 10 hotels in the world.

You then get experts to speak on the passive smoking issue, coming forward with clear-cut, credible, medical evidence that passive smoking is not harmful to the non-smoker's health.

And daunting reporters with impressive qualifications certainly helps at both sides of the passive smoking issue discovered. Reporters were also swamped with anti-smoking information by the Action on Smoking and Health group which had been tipped off the conference was on.

The first speaker at conference was Professor Philip Witorsch, MD, FACP, FCCP.

He is a pulmonary internist involved in patient care, medical teaching and research.

Statement

Professor Witorsch spoke on the scientific perspective of passive smoking, but stressed his statements should not be interpreted as representing tobacco industry views.

He disputed the findings of an American National Research Council report published last November, which estimated the relative risk of lung cancer in never-smoker women married to smoker men.

The next speaker was Mr Gray Robertson, BSc, co-founder and president of a Virginia firm called ACVA Atlantic Inc.

Since 1981 his company has studied more than 1.5 million sq m of space, occupied by more than 100,000 people while inspecting air conditioning systems.

Mr Robertson produced some astonishing results to support his equally astonishing claim that if tobacco smoking were banned in the workplace it would provide a health hazard.

The reporters came away well-fed, well-watered and well-rested. The answer is whether they were well-convinced that the tobacco industry is alive and well could be in their red eyes still irritated from the tobacco smoke which lurked over the tables during lunch.