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FAG END

Cigarettes attack the hearts of the young

Even the most dedicated libertarian is finding it increasingly difficult to find a good word to say for cigarettes. The latest evidence, from the largest study of heart attack survivors ever carried out in Britain, shows that the middle aged multiply their risks five-fold by smoking. Add to that the already well-established links with lung cancer, and the increased incidence of respiratory disease among the children of smokers, and it becomes difficult to produce any worthwhile defence for the practice.

Yet sixteen million people in Britain continue to smoke, and neither the health warnings nor the high price of cigarettes seem to deter the young, who are taking to tobacco in increasing numbers. If the facts alone had the power to liberate smokers from their habit, we might by now have expected to see more impressive results. The temptation of government is to move towards more decisive action: banning smoking in public places and forbidding the advertising of cigarettes, for example.

In the United States, President Clinton has followed a different tack, declaring nicotine to be a drug and thereby bringing it within the authority of the Food and Drug Administration. The FDA is to stop the sale of cigarettes from vending machines; tighten rules governing sales to teenagers; and ban advertisements designed to be attractive to children. Even if implemented, it is difficult to see these changes having much effect.

What else can be done? As Prohibition

proved, banning a substance enjoyed by millions is simply a method for multiplying the criminal classes and providing a source of income for organised crime. Unwise a habit as smoking may be, there are no grounds for making it a criminal offence. The only possible justification would be persuasive evidence that smoking damages the health of innocent bystanders. So far, studies of passive smoking have failed to provide that evidence. Wives, husbands, and children may be injured by the activities of a smoker in the home, but smoking in public places or even in the workplace has not been shown unequivocally to be dangerous, save to the smoker. If smoking is legal, banning the advertising of cigarettes would be an insupportable infringement of free speech.

Unpalatable as it may be to the Health Education Authority and other campaigners for healthy living, smoking falls into the area of personal discretion. Non-smokers may deem the habit dirty, dangerous, and expensive, but smokers have the right to live their own lives, and hasten their deaths, in whatever way they choose. In doing so, they may be consoled by the thought that while the tax on tobacco contributes £9 billion to the Treasury, the cost of treating smoking-related diseases is a mere £610 million. We may hope that the power of evidence such as today's report will ultimately convince smokers of their unwisdom; but we have no right to use the overbearing power of the State to insist upon it.