

Smoking in public: Let's separate fact from friction.

There has always been some friction between smokers and non-smokers. But lately this friction has grown more heated.

The controversy has been fueled by questionable reports which claim that "second-hand smoke" is a cause of serious diseases among non-smokers.

But, in fact, there is little evidence—and certainly nothing which proves scientifically—that cigarette smoke causes disease in non-smokers.

Skeptics might call this the wishful thinking of a tobacco company. But consider the scientific judgment of some of the leading authorities in the field—including outspoken critics of smoking.

For example, in 1983 the organizer of an international conference on environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) summarized the evidence on lung cancer as follows: "An overall evaluation based upon available scientific data leads to the conclusion that an increased risk for non-smokers from ETS exposure has not been established."

Even the chief statistician of the American Cancer Society, Lawrence Garfinkel, has gone on record as saying, "passive smoking may be a political matter, but it is not a main issue in terms of health policy."

Which brings us back to our original point: cigarette smoke can be very annoying to non-smokers.

But how shall we as a society deal with this problem?

Confrontation? Segregation? Legislation?

No. We think annoyance is neither a governmental problem nor a medical problem. It's a people problem.

Smokers and non-smokers have to talk to one another. Not yell, preach, threaten, badger or bully. Talk.

Smokers can help by being more considerate and responsible. Non-smokers can help by being more tolerant. And both groups can help by showing more respect for each other's rights and feelings.

But eliminating rumor and rhetoric will help most of all.

Because when you stick to the facts, it's a lot easier to deal with the friction.