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Tobacco sponsorship of sport: think again

Just before Christmas there was an event unprecedented in the history of public health in Britain: no fewer than 10 eminent medical men signed a letter to the Minister of Sport about the sponsorship of sport by tobacco companies. Readers may see for themselves (p 395) the reasoned arguments for calling for a ban on such sponsorship: they will also note that the signatories are hardly doctrinaire firebrands, including as they do the presidents of eight of the medical royal colleges. To reject such advice from these organisations against a background of at least 50 000 premature deaths and 50 million days a year off work through ill health due to cigarette smoking implies either that the arguments are wrong or that the Government has abnegated responsibility for public health. Given that no evidence has been produced for the former, there can only be dismay at the rumour, as we went to press, that the Government is about to conclude a new voluntary agreement with the tobacco industry on sports sponsorship. If this is so then the decision must be taken as showing an irresponsible and cynical lack of concern to prevent illness and death. When the history of medicine in the twentieth century comes to be written, the members of the Government who allowed such an agreement will stand indicted as the guilty men of public ill health.

Of particular concern is the way in which sports sponsorship has made a mockery of the ban on advertising cigarettes on television. The Independent Broadcasting Authority banned cigarette advertising in the mid-1960s and the BBC's charter expressly forbids advertising of any product—yet by far the greater amount of sponsored sport is shown on BBC television. Inevitably the product is mentioned both in the commentary and on the screen as well as in the programme in *Radio Times*. The amount of such coverage is striking. Between January and June 1981 six in the top 20 events in terms of television coverage were sponsored by tobacco companies, receiving a total of 124 hours of screen time.¹ The Embassy World Snooker Championships took up almost 73 hours of screen time; “considering the prize money of £150 000, it must rank as the best media buy of the century.”¹

There are other grounds for concern about concealed advertising on television—all of them linked to the way in which the stipulations in the voluntary code of advertising

tobacco are being circumvented. Firstly, in effect, advertisements for cigarettes have returned to the television screen, yet there is no accompanying health warning. Secondly, there is a clear association between smoking and healthy outdoor activity—forbidden in the voluntary agreement on ordinary advertising. Thirdly, inevitably this link is brought to the attention of the young, again something forbidden in the voluntary agreement.

All of these points have been made cogently and repeatedly to the Government, yet all of them will have been ignored if sponsorship is to continue. If sponsorship by the tobacco companies were to be forbidden there would be no shortage of other sponsors to come forward. Moreover, an additional tax of 1p on a packet of cigarettes would raise another £60m—enough to cover present sports sponsorship by the tobacco companies as well as to help the arts, which have increasingly accepted similar help in the last few years. Despite the recent claim that cigarettes have been taxed enough, few doctors who have seen the associated havoc of illness and death would agree; faced with a similar product with human hazards—say, mineral water containing hepatitis virus—would any government really allow its continued marketing let alone promotion in the media and sponsorship of the arts and sport?

Of the ethical tenets by which doctors practise, one—concern for the individual—has recently been illustrated in another context. No effort or cost was spared to find the Prime Minister's son, Mr Mark Thatcher, lost in the desert in a car rally. Taking similar measures every day, doctors will understand and applaud this action and its outcome. Nevertheless, there is an equally important tenet which is well recognised by doctors but not yet by politicians or some of the public—namely, concern for the group. With so many of our population at risk of serious disease or premature death from a preventable, minority habit of no known benefit the profession would be failing in its duty if it did not constantly reiterate the known facts. The Government should think again about allowing sports sponsorship and condoning this continued threat to public health.

¹ Koshi J. Which sports get more TV coverage for their sponsors? *Campaign* 1981:Aug 22:15A.