Varieties of Smoke

One of the recommendations made by the Royal College of Physicians1 2 in its report on smoking and health published earlier this year concerned the chemical content of cigarettes. The tar and nicotine content of all marketed brands of cigarettes should be published, it said, and should be printed on the packets. A committee under the aegis of the Department of Health is at present examining the possibility of doing this. Last week the Consumer Association’s magazine Which3 anticipated Government action by publishing a table showing the amount of tar and nicotine per cigarette for a number of brands and for some small cigars.

If a person could choose to smoke a brand of cigarettes known to have a low content of tar and nicotine he might be able to reduce the risk of ill health from his habit. At least common sense suggests this and the royal college’s report declares it. But is it true? For what needs to be considered is the term “content.” The Which? report does not state how the amounts of tar and nicotine it lists in milligrams per cigarette were extracted, but we are informed that a smoking machine was used. The presence or absence of a filter would make a difference to the yield, though the cigarette stub has a filtering effect and filters themselves vary in efficiency. In fact some untipped cigarettes were found to yield less tar and nicotine than some with filter tips. But the difficulty remains of how to interpret any published figures in terms of comparative yield of tar and nicotine by different brands of cigarette to the mouth and respiratory system of the smoker.

The doubt about the meaning of such figures in practical terms derives from the variation in smoking behaviour of people using different kinds of cigarettes. People do not smoke like machines. Heather Ashton and D. W. Watson4 showed that smokers of low-nicotine cigarettes had a higher frequency of puffing than smokers of high-nicotine cigarettes and drew into their mouths nearly the same amount of nicotine. Smokers seemed to adjust their technique to provide themselves with the dose of nicotine that they needed to satisfy their desire for it.

But if the Which? figures are difficult to interpret the advice it gives its readers is incontestable: “Giving up smoking altogether is the one course open to smokers which is of real benefit.” The Department of Health might do better to hammer that home than authorize what would inevitably be a considerable expenditure of money, skill, and time on analysing the tar and nicotine content of cigarettes or tobacco in any form. It is questionable whether such figures, however obtained and presented, could offer a basis for a “healthy” choice of cigarette.