

Health and smoking

British physicians lose patience

THE British Royal College of Physicians roundly condemns the promotional activities of British and American tobacco companies in a report* published last week on the effects of smoking on health. The college also laments the failure "through apathy and vested interest" of successive British governments to implement most of its previous recommendations.

The report, the college's fourth on the subject, was produced by a committee under the chairmanship of its immediate past president, and the government's chief medical officer in 1973-77, Sir Douglas Black, who has now also been asked by the government to investigate the high incidence of leukaemia in parts of West Cumbria. The report says that, for all the main tobacco-related diseases (lung cancer, chronic obstructive lung disease and various cardiovascular conditions), the chief question is no longer whether tobacco causes the disease but how to avoid these effects. The annual number of deaths due to smoking in Britain is put at not less than 100,000 — about 16 times more than are killed on the roads.

The tobacco industry, however, maintains a public stance that would be funny if it were not serious. A spokesman for the Tobacco Advisory Council, which represents all the British manufacturers, said "We in the tobacco industry do not accept that there is any causal connection between smoking and the so-called smoking-related diseases". Neither does the Tobacco Advisory Council accept that a ban on cigarette advertising — recommended by the Royal College — would lead to a reduction in tobacco consumption (although the council is, nevertheless, opposed to such a ban). The spokesman even that he thought Mr John Patten, the Minister for Health, shared this opinion.

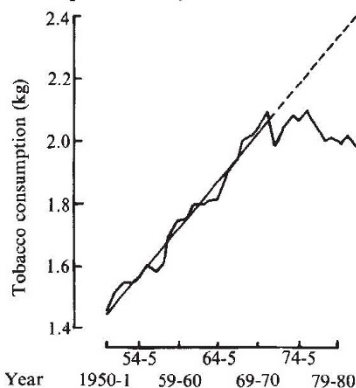
According to Mr David Simpson of Action on Smoking and Health (ASH), anyone doubting that a ban on advertising could lead to a reduction in consumption must be unfamiliar with the facts. Data from Norway quoted in the Royal College's report seem to show clearly that a ban on advertising can have a dramatic effect on consumption (see figure).

Following publication of the Royal College's report, Mr Patten said he believed that, within the constraints of a free society, government policies had proved generally effective. Although the price of cigarettes fell in real terms between 1960 and 1980, the trend has since been reversed. Mr Patten pointed out that British sales of cigarettes have declined by 20 per cent in the past four years. A major government aim is to prevent young people from starting to smoke and Mr Patten will shortly be meeting retailers' representatives to discuss how better to enforce a law forbidding the sale of tobacco to

children under 16 years of age.

The Royal College of Physicians is "not at all happy" with Mr Patten's assurances, according to its secretary Mr Michael Tibbs. Recognizing that to ask for a ban on tobacco sales would be unrealistic and even undesirable, the college wants a commitment to increase tobacco tax faster than the rate of inflation. This, it says, would give tobacco companies time to diversify their activities, as they are already starting to do. It would also prolong the government's tax revenues, which are now about £4,500 million a year. The college's president has asked for meetings with the Secretary of State for Social Services, Mr Norman Fowler, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr Nigel Lawson.

This stratagem appears to be an attempt to avoid what the Royal College claims was the fate of its previous reports on smoking: health ministers known to favour the prevention programme were moved to other departments, so that effective



Annual sales of smoking tobacco and cigarettes in Norway, as kilograms per capita (aged 15 years and over). A cigarette is assumed to contain 1 gram of tobacco. In 1970 the Norwegian Tobacco Act, which included a ban on cigarette advertisement, was first discussed. In 1975 the act became law. The regression line is fitted to sales between 1950-51 and 1969-70. Source: Directorate of Customs and Excise and Central Bureau of Statistics, Norway.

government action to phase out advertising was blocked. The Royal College describes the government's record in allowing tobacco companies to circumvent a ban on television advertising by sponsoring sports events as "particularly feeble".

Although the risk to smokers of developing lung cancer relative to that of non-smokers is higher than that for other smoking-related diseases, more excess deaths among smokers are caused by cardiovascular conditions than by cancer. Incidence of lung cancer among men in Britain is decreasing, reflecting in part the trend towards lower tar yield cigarettes. Women, however, started to reduce their consumption much more recently, and their lung cancer rates will continue to increase for some years. Although it is not

known what components of smoke cause chronic obstructive lung disease and cardiovascular disease, the Royal College recommends reductions in tar, nicotine and carbon monoxide yields.

The most alarming conclusions are those relating to tobacco consumption in developing countries. Cigarettes are vigorously promoted and smoking is increasing more rapidly than in any Western country. Tar and nicotine yields are also higher. The Royal College says "The international tobacco industry can be expected to oppose and hinder efforts to reduce smoking. In doing so, it will be directly responsible for fostering the deaths of thousands, in the twentieth century's most avoidable epidemic."

Tim Beardsley

*Health or Smoking? Follow-up Report of the Royal College of Physicians (Pitman, London, 1983).

Royal Society row

FELLOWS of the Royal Society of London who are upset by the recent elevation to their ranks of the Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, are planning to press for the abolition of the statute under which she was elected.

Mrs Thatcher was made a fellow of the society last June by a special election under statute 12, which allows the society to honour non-scientists who have "rendered conspicuous service to the cause of science, or are such that their election would be a signal benefit to the society". Mrs Thatcher won the required two-thirds majority by a narrow margin. Mr David Attenborough, best known as a presenter of television films on natural history, was elected under the same rule at the same time.

Many members, however, were unhappy about having an active politician among their number — particularly one who had presided over a substantial decline in the level of public support for academic institutions. Then a newspaper suggested that the ballot to elect Mrs Thatcher had been technically in breach of the rules. Statute 12 requires that special elections should be held "not earlier than the third Ordinary Meeting" after a proposal certificate is announced. In Mrs Thatcher's case, one of the meetings was unexpectedly cancelled, so the ballot took place at the second ordinary meeting to have been held.

The society hurriedly took legal advice and its president, Sir Andrew Huxley, has now written to members assuring them that Mrs Thatcher's election stands. One consequence seems to have been that many fellows have expressed a sudden urgent wish to repeal statute 12 — although Mrs Thatcher's name was not mentioned in this context. Sir Andrew, apparently concerned that a hurried decision might nevertheless be considered to slight recently elected members, pleaded that fellows should discuss and consult on the matter over the next 12 months.

Tim Beardsley