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## Tar Wars—A Community-Based Tobacco Education Project

Jeffrey J. Cain, MD, Timothy E. Dudley, MD, and Mary K. Wilkerson, MD

*Broomfield and Denver, Colorado*

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Each day 80 children in the state of Colorado will try tobacco for the first time. For many this will be the initiation of a lifelong addiction. Subsequent mortality from this addiction is, on an annual basis, greater than that from drug abuse, AIDS, suicide, homicide, and motor vehicle accidents combined.

In 1988 one of the authors (J.C.) met Glenna Pember at a meeting of the Denver Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Colorado. At that time he was chief resident at Mercy Medical Center's family medicine program and an active member of the local chapter of Doctors Ought to Care (DOC). Ms Pember worked in the Hall of Life, a division of the Denver Museum of Natural History. Together they launched a project to prevent adolescent tobacco addiction. The objective was to help fifth graders understand the methods being employed to persuade them to use tobacco products.

Based on the "Superhealth 2000" poster contest originated by DOC in South Carolina, "Tar Wars" reached 7000 children in its first year. In the second year, with support from the Colorado Academy of Family Physicians and the St Anthony Healthcare Corporation (now Provenant Health Partners), the project was offered to schools statewide. In the 1990-91 school year, over 150 family physicians participated as guest speakers in fifth-grade classrooms, reaching over 20,000 students. This represents over 50% of all the fifth graders in Colorado.

Fifth-grade teachers are given a short activity to perform with the class before the scheduled session with the guest speaker. This activity is designed to show that smokers are in the minority of the population and to reinforce the concept that smoking is linked to the development of disease (see box).

The session with the guest speaker focuses on the

short-term consequences of tobacco use, including the socially undesirable effects on breath, appearance, and physical performance. The lesson has an interactive component, with the children discussing decision-making skills and analyzing tobacco advertisements. Following the lesson, the children are invited to create a poster that focuses on the positive effects of not smoking (Figure 1). The posters are displayed in a contest at each school. Judges then select the best poster. Winners from each school are judged at a contest in the Hall of Life. The grand prize is an all-expenses-paid trip to Disney World for the winner and his or her family. Figure 2 is an example of an award-winning poster that was reproduced as a postcard by the Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Colorado.

Tar Wars received a special recognition award from the World Health Organization for tobacco education. The American Medical Association recognized the program with a certificate of merit for excellence in education and prevention of adolescent substance abuse. The US Secretary of Health and Human Services, Louis Sullivan, MD, gave Tar Wars an award as an outstanding community health promotion program.

We regularly receive positive feedback from the physicians who have participated as presenters in the Tar Wars program. Most of them simply say how much fun it is. If you would like to teach the Tar Wars curriculum in your area, it takes only minimal effort. Preparation time is about 20 minutes using the curriculum available from DOC (telephone 713-798-7729), and the actual presentation is approximately 40 minutes (Figure 3).

We suggest early collaboration with an organization such as the School Nurses Association or the School Health Association in your community. These groups welcome input from local family physicians. Their support is very helpful in approaching specific schools. Emphasize the interactive nature of the program and the rewards for the children.

When you are ready to expand, your local medical

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*From the North Sheridan Practice, Broomfield (Dr Cain), and Mercy Family Medicine Residency Program, Mercy Medical Center, Denver (Drs Dudley and Wilkerson). Address correspondence to Jeffrey J. Cain, MD, North Sheridan Family Practice, 11550 N Sheridan Ave, Broomfield, CO 80020.*

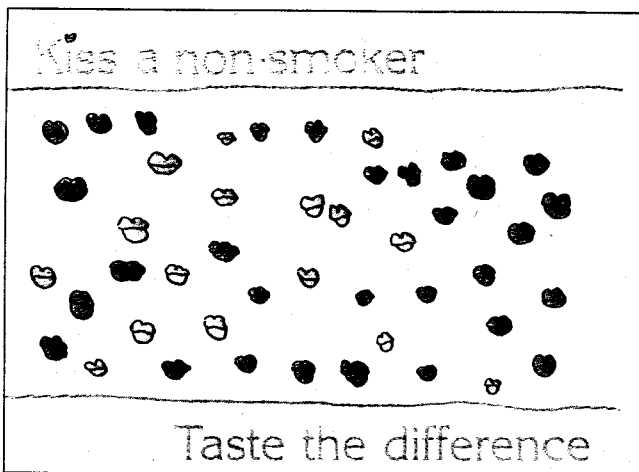


Figure 1. Winning poster in the 1990 Tar Wars Poster Contest sponsored by the Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Colorado.

society or your state Academy of Family Physicians should be helpful. If there is a family practice residency program nearby, you should ask its director to include your program as an option in the "community medicine" portion of the curriculum. If there is a DOC chapter in your area, its members will be happy to help. There may be other local health promotion groups unique to your area that will be eager to provide support.

Physician involvement is important to neutralize the tobacco industry's high-cost, high-profile advertising campaign. A program in which physicians speak directly to students can be an effective prevention mechanism in your community, as we believe it has been in ours.

During the 1991-92 school term, Tar Wars will be offered to students in eight states in the western United States by the Rocky Mountain Tobacco-Free Challenge.

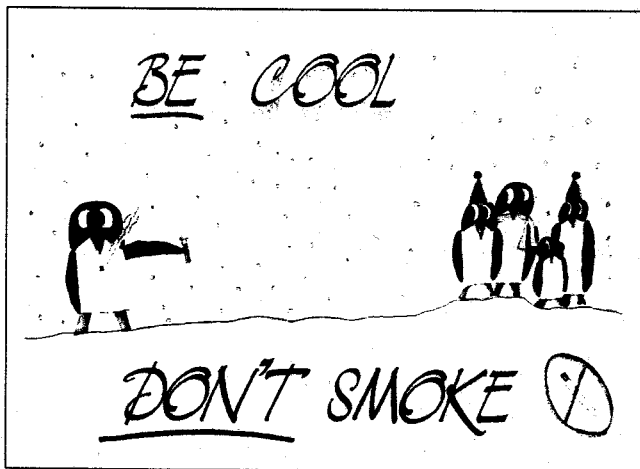


Figure 2. Some of the winning posters from the 1990 Tar Wars Poster Contest were made into postcards by the Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Colorado.

## Cigarettes and Advertising

Tobacco companies want you to start smoking. In fact, they spend about 3 billion dollars in the United States every year trying to get you to do just that. If they could get you to start, they would have a brand new customer. You would probably end up paying them money every day for the rest of your life.

A lot of cigarette ads show pictures of people apparently enjoying cigarettes. The actors and models who appear in these ads (many of whom are really nonsmokers) are supposed to look like the sort of people you would admire and want to imitate.

Take a good look at the ads your group was given. Answer the following questions.

- Describe the picture used in the ad.
- What is the ad saying about cigarettes?
- What is it saying about people who smoke this brand of cigarette?
- Who would be interested in this ad?
- Could the picture in this ad also be used to sell nonsmoking? If so, how?
- Take another close look at the ad. List five things you do not see in the picture even though they would normally be there in real life (ash trays, for example). Why do you think these things were left out?

Figure 3. Sample of the worksheet portion of the Tar Wars curriculum.

Working on a protocol developed by Ned Colonge, MD, and his associates at the Department of Family Medicine of the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, the Mercy Family Medicine Residency Program will conduct research on the effectiveness of this educational program. The authors hope that family physicians will see Tar Wars as a project that can be initiated at any level by even a few interested people. Family physicians are uniquely situated to encourage the involvement of schools, community health promotion people, and the community at large.

### Reference

1. Mansur L. What's up with DOC? AAFP Reporter Dec 1980:6-8.