

“The Surgeon General vs. The Marlboro Man: Who Really Won?”

On January 11, 1964, at a packed press conference in Washington, DC, Surgeon General Luther Terry released one of the most important documents in the history of medicine. *The Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health* was the culmination of a year-long analysis of the world literature on smoking by a ten-member scientific advisory committee. The damning conclusion: “Cigarette smoking is causally related to lung cancer in men . . . and is a health hazard of sufficient importance to warrant appropriate remedial action.”

Yet for decades—right up until the 2000s—cigarette manufacturers continued to publicly dispute the evidence about the harmfulness of smoking and sought to allay consumer anxiety by implying that new filtered, low-tar, and light brands were not harmful. The result: fifty years after the Surgeon General's landmark report, even as other epidemics such as AIDS, obesity, and diabetes have taken center stage—and in spite of advances in the diagnosis and treatment of lung cancer and heart disease that have prolonged lives—the health and economic toll taken by smoking remains devastating.

“The Surgeon General vs. The Marlboro Man: Who Really Won?” is the provocative title of an original exhibition to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the report. It is curated by veteran anti-smoking strategist Alan Blum, MD, director of the University of Alabama Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society. Featuring more than 130 artifacts that include cigarette ads in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, a cigarette filter made of asbestos, packages of candy cigarettes identical to real ones, hospital ashtrays, and a Mayo Clinic cigarette case, the exhibition traces both the promotion of smoking and the efforts to end it. A gallery tour of the exhibition may be seen here: <http://youtu.be/O1-8DY9oJLo>.

The exhibition debuted at the Gorgas Library of the University of Alabama before going to the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library in Austin and the Texas Medical Center Library in Houston. A traveling version of the exhibition is available to medical schools, libraries, and museums. Contact

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In the companion film, “Blowing Smoke: The Lost Legacy of the Surgeon General's Report,” Dr. Blum argues that efforts to eliminate smoking have become more symbol than substance. The twenty-five-minute film, available free online (<https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B1j5VTNHmZZmcFJWLW1wbDF3Mms/>) and for screening to audiences, chronicles what he calls “the fear, foot-dragging, and squandering of funds on the part of public health agencies, universities, and organized medicine in ending the smoking pandemic.”

“Surgeon General Terry's indictment of cigarettes in 1964 should have marked the beginning of the end of the Marlboro Man,” Blum says. “Yet far from riding off into the sunset, the tobacco industry is still riding high in the saddle.”

In the film, Blum points to the record profits of the nation's leading cigarette manufacturer Altria, maker of Marlboro; the company's recruitment of college students on more than thirty-five university campuses as the new Marlboro sales force; and the significant investment in Altria by TIAA-CREF and other major pension funds. Moreover, although the percentage of American adults who smoke has declined to twenty percent, the number of people who continue using cigarettes—nearly 45 million—is not much less than in 1964.

“The fiftieth anniversary of the first Surgeon General's Report is hardly a time for celebration,” Blum says. “Rather, it should be a sobering reminder of the missed opportunities to reduce demand for cigarettes, which remain the nation's number one avoidable cause of cancer, heart disease, emphysema, and high health costs. That nearly all government funding that is allocated to fight smoking is spent on research that adds very little to what we have known since 1964 is disgraceful. It suggests that the most addictive thing about tobacco is money.”

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