

The International Conference on the Control of the Smoking Habit was held in Caracas, Venezuela, October 1 - 3, 1980, with strong support, morally and economically, from the National Government, and with broad participation on the part of important Venezuelan doctors, behavioral scientists, economists, educators and communicators.

It was co-sponsored by the International Union Against Cancer (IUAC), the Ministry of Health (Oncology Division) and the Anti-Cancer Society of Venezuela. There were four representatives of the IUAC, Drs. Robert Wake and Fred Bass of Canada, and Elaine Bratic and Robert Conover of the U.S.A.; and one or more of them participated directly in seven of the ten symposia into which the Conference was divided.

All proceedings took place in the government-owned Parque Central Conference Center, in a single meeting room with a capacity of 300. Attendance was poor. 150 attended the opening session when two cabinet ministers were on the platform. Following sessions were attended by from 70 to 130 people, mostly university students, who had been invited to attend under government "scholarships" covering the \$35.00 student admission fee. Very few, probably less than fifty, paid the full \$70.00 participation fee. The session on restrictive legislation on the final day set the Conference record with an audience of 200, mostly law students who came to hear their professors.

Press coverage of the event was generous, both for the build-up in the weeks preceding the Conference, and during the 3-day meeting as well. The government's news agency (Venpress) handled the advance publicity extremely well, as part of the official support program. However, notably absent from nine of the ten sessions were the TV cameras from the country's two major networks. They came to cover only the symposium on "Advertising and the Control of the Smoking Habit", for which two speakers favorable to the industry position were on the program.

The Conference itself was extremely well organized, very professional and orderly. Questions from the audience were accepted only in writing, and there were no interruptions of the speakers at any time. Even the two speakers who expressed opinions against limiting cigarette advertising were listened to respectfully and (perfunctorily) applauded. The simultaneous translation services, Spanish to English and vice versa, functioned well throughout; and the documentary support services and press office operated efficiently.

It should be noted that the government's enthusiastic participation in this Conference is a logical consequence of President Luis Herrera's statements dating from August, 1979, to the effect that "1980 is the International Year against the Cigarette". The Minister of Youth, Charles Brewer, has publicly and frequently attacked cigarette smoking and TV advertising of cigarettes since March, 1979, when he was named Minister. He attended the opening session, but did not show up for his programmed assignment of presiding over the symposium on Youth and Cigarettes on the second day.

✓ The Conference was officially opened by Health Minister, Dr. Alfonso Benzecry, who stressed the government's and the President's personal

tobacco use  
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support for its success. He promised that his Ministry will work with the Ministry of Youth to reach the nation's youth with the message that "cigarettes are their enemy and not their friend". He stated that "if cigarettes did not exist, a case of lung cancer would be a discovery". He urged strong efforts to persuade people to stop smoking, to minimize their risk; or, at least, if they have to smoke, to dilute the quantity of nicotine and tar in their cigarettes. He urged the Conference to reach practical conclusions which could be put to work, and he called for the formation of an anti-tobacco association in Venezuela. The Minister also indicated that he expected that new taxes will soon be added to the current cigarette tax levels, in a move to discourage consumption.

Fred Bass followed him with a talk on the world smoking situation, identifying it as pandemic, and likely to get worse before it gets better. He identified a long list of diseases as being caused by smoking, a litany that was heard a dozen times or more from different speakers during the three days. He stated that "it is not a question of whether cigarette smoking will disappear, but when", and added that opposers must think in terms not of years of struggle, but of decades.

Dr. Rafael Riquez Irribarren, President of the National Academy of Medicine, listed figures for Venezuelan cigarette consumption and stated, without source of reference, that the habit was costing the nation \$1.6 billion per year in social damage to health, productivity, life expectancy, etc.; far more than the \$400 million that the industry represents to the country's economic development annually. He estimated deaths from cigarettes at 20,000 per year, and added that health risks from cigarettes were one in fifty, compared to one in 15,000 for automobiles and one in 13,300 for wine bibbing. Dr. Riquez Irribarren stated that the obvious conclusion is that the government must urgently prohibit cigarette advertising.

Dr. Manuel Adrianza, former President of the Pneumonologists Society, and a Health Ministry division chief, ended the inaugural session with a highly emotional speech in which he defined the cigarette as "the worst calamity for the human race in its entire history". He called for "a war against the cigarette; a daily cultivation of total rejection, to create and implement social pressures to achieve this rejection in all places and in all life stages". Neither doctors nor teachers should smoke at all, and no politicians or TV/movie stars should be permitted to smoke in public, he said.

Dr. Adrianza, who has a long record of highly vocal public opposition to smoking, ran through a lengthy list of diseases he ascribes to cigarettes, and added up the alleged damages done to life and health by all of these, arriving at the final conclusion that 60% of all deaths that occur in Venezuela are attributable to smoking. Interestingly enough, he also said that he was desolate at not being able to demonstrate the proof of his suspicions with rigid mathematical accuracy. However, he added that it was easy to see the difference between smokers and non-smokers at a glance; as the smoker looks older than he really is,