

Re: Why Do Researchers Tell Lies About Smoking and Health?

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On Sat, 26 May 2007 22:47:54 -0400, Richard Ulrich
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On Thu, 24 May 2007 00:25:17 +0800, Ray Johnstone <ray@xxxxxxxxxxxx>
wrote:

Why Do Researchers Tell Lies About Smoking and Health?
Scientists like to have new ideas and results. That is how science
makes progress. But the ideas and results must not be too radical.
They must be compatible with orthodox science. For the question of
smoking and health that means they must be consistent with the belief
that smoking is overall harmful to health.

- I'd only say, "... overall harmful to health in many respects."

This poses a serious but not
insurmountable problem for scientists studying diseases which appear
to be prevented by smoking. This includes ulcerative colitis,

Well, they can't spout off like idiots, but I'm not sure
where there is a 'serious' problem at all. The scientists
who *really* have to speak carefully are the ones whose
evidence indicate that a daily drink or two might help
prevent heart disease, while acknowledging that much more
drink than that is a hazard for both physical and mental health.

pre-eclampsia, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, allergic lung disease and
dementia. Papers describing such work usually include a statement such
as: "Conclusions - These findings suggest an inverse association
between smoking and Alzheimer's disease, although smoking cannot be
advocated for other health reasons." (van Duijn and Hofman, 1991) It

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is like a protective mantra: Yes, smoking seems to prevent some disease but this has not shaken our faith. [... break]

The major cause of death from smoking is heart disease, not cancer. That handles a couple of your further objections.

These days, one link seems to be between smoking, infections of the gums, and the circulatory system.

A major feature to consider in the practice of science is the "research program." Scientists look in the directions where advance seems possible. This has long been the case, according to the people who study the history of science.

I recommend the book, *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, edited by Imre Lakatos. This is a set of discussions from a symposium on the ideas of Thomas Kuhn's -- "normal" and "revolutionary" science, and paradigms. This was a 'heavy read' when I read it 20+ years ago, but more of the ideas should be a bit familiar today.

I read "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions " about 35 years ago and was quite impressed by it.

Apparently, as we learn from history, an idea is not always "defeated" by being proven wrong. It may be abandoned when other ideas succeed in attracting all the graduate students. That is what happened, for instance, with "phlogiston". Its proponents were never convinced by the new-fangled caloric theory of heat, but they did not lead a new generation of scientists.

Now, if there are some folks out there with theories of some healing powers of cigarettes, they do have to recognize that smoking is a powerful poison. Not only that, but it is simply obnoxious to the people in the near vicinity.

"Powerful" is surely the wrong word. No controlled trial has shown that smokers increase their life expectancy if they quit. The heaviest smokers in the world, the Japanese, should not be the world's longest-living people if they were consuming a "powerful poison".

It is like a devout Christian who finds himself in the presence of evil and makes the sign of the cross. This gesture both protects him from the evil and at the

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same time asserts his unwavering and steadfast faith. But there is one part of smoking and health which is much more troublesome and that is smoking and cancer. For fifty years this has been the cornerstone of the antismoking movement. Without it the entire edifice might crumble. The vast financial enterprise of the antismoking movement might collapse, and with it its well-heeled propagandists.

Who is well-heeled?

Antismoking, both government and private, is now a big business. I understand that in the US it is largely subsidised by the large court payout from some years ago.

The government still subsidizes tobacco growers. The Senate used to represent Democrats in the south who stood for Oil and Tobacco; Democrats got too uneasy about the morality of standing for death and profiteering, and the Republicans happily took over. In a sort of Libertarian comeuppance, courts have awarded many *billions* to the anti-smoking side... in some fashion. George Bush, et al., are still working to undo those decisions (part of 'tort reform' – maybe an essential part).

All the easy money comes from the side that sells drugs, that is, cigarettes. Especially the money for scientists. Yes, look at money as motivation for arguments.

The scientist who finds for example that smoking does not cause lung cancer or, far worse, that it prevents lung cancer, is in an invidious position. He cannot say "we have shown that cigarette smoke prevents lung cancer, although smoking cannot be advocated for other health reasons." That would appear ludicrous. This was the problem faced by Boffetta et al (1998) in their case-control study of passive smoking and lung cancer conducted for the World Health Organization, the largest ever conducted. Their dilemma is revealed in the abstract of their paper: "Results: ETS [PS] exposure during childhood was not associated with an increased risk of lung cancer (odds ratio for ever exposure = 0.78; 95% confidence interval = 0.64 0.96"

and

"Conclusions: Our results indicate no association between childhood exposure to ETS and lung cancer risk."

To anyone familiar with scientific prose this is grotesque. The authors state their results as numbers and then in words deny they found any such thing. It seems that Boffetta et al found their own results so disturbing they could not bear to mention them in words and indeed felt obliged to lie about them. Furthermore, just as they could not confront their own results nor could they mention the work of

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Brownson et al (1992) who had found a similar significant protective effect.

This is not nit-picking or pedantry. The history of science is replete with examples of surprising, even paradoxical results which have proved far more productive than results which were expected. The work of Boffetta et al is quoted in about 40 other PS papers. I have yet to find even one which mentions their only significant result. Like Boffetta, their attitude seems to be "Don't mention the nasty bogeyman and he might go away."

I haven't checked those sources, but here is a guess.
Assuming the research goes exactly as you describe it,
I will suggest their attitude may be, "There is no way that
this finding fits into a reasonable research program."

That – more or less – is what they should have said. They said nothing.

Or,
if there is a place, it might be in looking for confounding variables
that prevented the 'expected' result. In my opinion, the
expected effects are small enough that they would be
expensive to investigate for any purpose.

Why do researchers tell lies about smoking and health? Because some
things are too disturbing to admit and their existence must be denied.

Nah, that can't be the whole story. Too many scientists are
happy to admit odd findings if they promise new research
opportunities. And everyone is looking for miracle cures.
But in this case, Where is the viable research?

I think it would come from a more rational approach to the question of
smoking and health. In Australia the age-adjusted death rate has not
improved for 80 years. (I would expect a similar result for the US but
I don't recall ever seeing the numbers.)

Two thirds of the reports from the Surgeon General are about smoking
and health. I think there has been a lot of misguided and misdirected
effort.

Boffetta et al (1998): <http://members.iinet.net.au/~ray/WHO1.mht>

Brownson et al (1992): <http://members.iinet.net.au/~ray/b.html>

Van Duijn and Hofman (1991): BMJ, 302, 1491–1494

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