

Acupuncturists for a Smoke-Free World

Gregg St. Clair, BA, MSTOM, LAc

Both my parents smoked when I was growing up and I hated it. *Abhorred* would be a better word. No matter how I ranted and raved, nothing changed. In the car, at the dinner table, in bowling alleys and restaurants, and at birthday parties. Cigarette smoking was pervasive. It wasn't just my parents either; aunts, uncles, friends and strangers all smoked around me. I've inhaled more than 20 years of second-hand smoke, and my mom, of course, smoked when she was pregnant.

With perspective now, I guess I can't say I really blame them. Smoking was part of the culture. My dad tells me [Joe Di Maggio and doctors](#) would come on TV and tout the benefits of cigarettes. Just watch any old movie. I recently saw one of Alfred Hitchcock's movies, "[The Man Who Knew Too Much](#)," and was shocked. Every character chain-smoked in every scene. It's hard not to be influenced by that type of social pressure.

But still, I hate smoking. I'm one of the few people that can say they never even tried it. I ask all smokers that come to me the same question: "How did you like it the first time?" The answer is invariably the same: "I hated it!" When I ask why they continued, it's always: "I don't know." In my parents' generation at least they had an excuse, but today everybody knows how unhealthy smoking is, so why do it? The common answer I get to this is that it made them feel grown up or they wanted to look cool.

There are other reasons. How about the cigarette industry spending [\\$36 million per day](#) on advertising and promoting cigarettes? How about every pharmacy, gas station and supermarket having a shrine like display of cigarettes at the front of every store? How about Hollywood and the media's glamorization of smoking?

[Eighty percent of all smokers](#) start before they are 18. [Twenty percent of high school students are current cigarette smokers](#). Looks like even though the awareness of the dangers of smoking have risen, the social consciousness hasn't changed that much since my parents' time.

The [Centers for Disease Control & Prevention \(CDC\)](#) state that smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States. One in five deaths, about 443,000 per year, are from smoking. Not only that, but for every person who dies from smoking, 20 more suffer from a smoking-related disease such as emphysema, chronic bronchitis or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Worldwide, smoking causes 5 million deaths per year. On top of these statistics, add another 10 percent for people dying from second-hand smoke. On average, smokers die 13 to 14 years earlier than nonsmokers.

Not only has the tobacco industry committed one of the biggest crimes against humanity, it is one of the biggest crimes against the environment since it is considered one of the number one causes of pollution in the world. There are hundreds of chemicals not only in cigarettes, but pesticides and chemicals banned by the FDA are [sprayed on tobacco plantations](#). Cigarette butts take [25 years](#) to decompose and are carelessly discarded by smokers, who seem to have as little care about poisoning the Earth as poisoning themselves, creating a blanket of pollution around the world.

As acupuncturists who treat smoking, this gives us the opportunity to be on the front line of one of the world's largest health and environmental problems. In the almost 10 years I've been doing this, I've treated about 100 smokers and I have an 80 percent success rate. [Seton Health Center for Smoking Cessation](#) just received an \$81,000 grant for their Butt Stops Here program, yet boast only a 30 percent success rate. The patch has a 22 percent success rate and nicotine gum is at 6 percent. It is time acupuncture is accepted and supported in larger medical settings as a viable treatment for addiction and smoking.

I envision a global network of acupuncturists for a smoke free world. Think about how many people in not only the U.S., but Europe and Asia smoke. With acupuncture flourishing in these places, we have the opportunity to help people and the environment simultaneously. There are many opportunities to offer our services, help people and make money. There are smoking cessation programs through local hospitals, detox clinics, AA meetings and health fairs. I did a health fair for smoking cessation for the employees of Blue Shield of Northeastern New York. They offered to give their employees eight free acupuncture treatments, reimbursing me for the visits. This is the type of thinking we need to make deep change.

Group, community and working-people styles of treatment are becoming more popular models across the country. This becomes the perfect vehicle for bringing smoking cessation to a wider audience. There are corporate wellness programs that go into large corporations to teach healthy techniques to employees that save the businesses money. I am in correspondence right now with one, talking about the possibilities of making acupuncture part of their wellness program. An example of this is that we've recently heard about [Whole Foods](#) supermarket teaming up with acupuncture to create healthy programs for their employees.

All those tobacco-related deaths a year comes to 1,200 people per day. It's estimated that 45 million people smoke in the U.S. alone. Seventy percent of these people report they want to quit completely, and more than 40 percent try to quit each year. That's a lot of potential patients. \$193 billion is lost annually from productivity and health care expenditures on trying to keep up with these tobacco-related illnesses.

As acupuncturists, we have the ability to save people's lives, protect the environment and save billions of dollars on health care for our country. I propose we find a way to band together partnering with organizations such as the [National Acupuncture Detox Association](#) and [Students Working Against Tobacco](#) to create a healthier, smoke-free world. If anyone is interested in talking more about these possibilities, please e-mail me at grstclair@netzero.com.

I know this is no easy task. How do we compete against the militant big tobacco companies and \$36 million a day in advertising. Progress, though slow, can happen. In my lifetime we now have smoke-free schools, restaurants, airlines and hospitals. Things are changing and the time is now, more than ever, to stand up for what is right.

AUGUST 2009