E-Cigarette Campaigns are Disturbingly Similar to Banned Tobacco Ads

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The Tobacco Advertising Collection at the Smithsonian Institution contains more than 30,000 examples of cigarette advertising by tobacco companies. Entitled “Not a Cough in a Carload: Images from the Tobacco Industry Campaign to Hide the Hazards of Smoking,” the twelve-part archive series, created by Dr. Robert Jacklar, emphasizes the deceptive advertising practices used to convince people that tobacco products were safe.

Dr. Jacklar, who treated many patients for cigarette-related illnesses and later lost his mother to cancer, is now creating a similar collection—this time with e-cigarette advertisements. According to Jacklar there is little difference in the messaging. He has reportedly collected 13,000 examples of deceptive e-cigarette ads and is vocally adamant that the industry is ignoring all of the agreements and bans that were agreed to by tobacco companies. Referencing the new juul product as an example, Jacklar was quoted in Smithsonian to say, “Very clearly, they do the same damn thing today as they did then. The messaging is very subtle, very carefully crafted...to appeal to adolescents.”

The text in e-cigarette ads often claim e-cigarettes are safe or “safer” than tobacco use, but these statements are undermined by study after study reporting negative health effects.

In addition, a recent MRI brain study by Yvonnes Chen at the University of Kansas revealed that e-cigarette ads that use rebellion themes, sex appeal, and references to fruit or candy flavors, trigger the pleasure centers of adolescent brains. Her study showed that adolescents experienced “significantly greater neural activation to e-cigarette advertising images compared with their responses to neutral advertising images.”

E-cigarette rhetoric also mirrors the cigarette and nicotine rhetoric given by executives and public relations companies during the Big Tobacco era. For example in the 1960s and 1970s tobacco companies introduced “low tar” products which were deceptively advertised as “healthy alternatives,” just like e-cigarettes advertised today. Tobacco company Lorillard did not even wait to introduce a low tar cigarette before it proclaimed in 1952, "If you think you are among those sensitive smokers — if you worry about the harmful effects of smoking ... no other cigarette approaches such a degree of health protection ...” In reality, the death rate among smokers of Lorillard, and “light” cigarettes, and other full-strength cigarettes remained the same. A recent study also showed that light cigarette smokers had an “increased chance of lung adenocarcinoma due to the ventilation holes the tobacco industry added in the 1960s and 1970s.” During this period tobacco companies were also “intentionally designing cigarettes to increase nicotine addiction” while simultaneously denying that nicotine was addictive.

Lorillard purchased e-cigarette industry leader, Blu, in 2012 and at this point nearly 50% of the e-cigarette industry is owned by tobacco companies. With that knowledge it is easy to see why e-cigarette messaging and ads look so disturbingly similar to cigarette ads of the past. Other than bans on advertising to children, there are no binding regulations that prevent these companies from making unsubstantiated claims until they can be proven false—most likely in court. They are not “tobacco” companies bound by the 1998 big tobacco Master Settlement Agreement, nor do they appear to be morally bound to correct their “mother” industry’s mistakes.

While we wait for more meaningful legislation to protect consumers, Dr. Jacklar will continue amassing his second collection of cigarette deceptive advertising claims leaving e-cigarette users with this thought, “Smoking initiation...
is an adolescent thing... they smoke, they get hooked on the nicotine, and they become lifelong consumers."

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