What About E-cigarettes?

Stanford T. Shulman, MD

This issue of Pediatric Annals includes a series of fascinating pediatric cases that are very educational. As noted by Stan L. Block, MD, FAAP, this is his last “Healthy Baby” column—at least for a while. Stan, the self-styled small town “country doctor,” has done a fabulous job of writing a column each month on a topic relevant to general pediatrics. We are greatly indebted to his outstanding efforts and his eagerness to share his wisdom from his long service in the trenches. Thank you, Stan! Job well done!

Pediatrics lost a giant recently. Dr. Mike Marcy, who worked at Kaiser Permanente in Southern California for many decades as an outstanding Infectious Diseases Clinician and Teacher, died recently at age 78 years. Mike was a most worthy recipient of the American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Infectious Disease’s Lifetime Achievement Award for Education. He was also a great friend. This loss in Pediatrics is great, and I send condolences to his family.

I wrote about “e-cigarettes” about 1 year ago. Electronic cigarettes provide vaporized nicotine that is addictive, but they lack combustible tobacco, which causes cancer and kills many thousands annually. Thus, many believe that e-cigarettes are relatively preferable to smoking cigarettes. Of course, this topic is important to those of us who take care of adolescents for whom avoidance of tobacco is a key item for discussion.

In an interesting column in The New York Times,1 columnist Joe Nocera summarized what he learned recently at the “2nd Annual E-Cig Conference.” The reasons aren’t precisely clear, but e-cigs have not been welcomed by the tobacco control community, probably because of lingering uncertainty about their safety. However, some traditional proponents of tobacco control are beginning to view e-cigs as useful in helping smokers to quit their habit.

Kenneth Warner of the University of Michigan and Harold Pollack of the University of Chicago recently published “The Nicotine Fix” on The Atlantic’s website.2 They consider there to be three groups of individuals in the modern tobacco control world: the Traditionalists, the Harm Reductionists, and the End-gamers. The Traditionalists argue that we need to keep doing what has worked so far, with warning labels on packages, public service ads, and legislation for increasing smoking restrictions. The Harm Reductionists favor reducing the dangers involved rather than trying to eliminate a risky behavior; for example, by substituting a related less dangerous behavior for a more dangerous one (like providing methadone rather than heroin). Finally, the End-gamers favor “variation on prohibition,” such as steadily reducing the amount of nicotine in cigarettes to the point of becoming nonaddictive, or prohibiting possession of tobacco products by anyone born after a particular year. Warner and Pollack2 advocate using a combination of all three strategies to achieve the end result of cigarettes not being addictive; they envision e-cigarettes as a viable alternative—potentially saving countless lives.

THIS MONTH’S STAMPS

To accompany the topic of this month’s column, I have chosen five smoking-related stamps. The white Sierra Leone stamp from 2006 commemorates the discovery of tobacco during Columbus’ 1492 stop in Cuba. Luis de Torres (died 1493), shown on this stamp, was Columbus’ Jewish interpreter who was sent to explore inland Cuba and on his return he reported on the native custom of drying tobacco leaves, putting them into cane pipes, burning them, and inhaling the smoke.

The green French stamp from 1961 portrays tobacco leaves and Jean Nicot (1530-1600), after whom nicotine is named. Nicot was the French ambassador to Portugal, and in Lisbon, his friend, the scholar and botanist Dimião de Góis showed him a tobacco plant and reported its healing properties. Nicot tested a tobacco ointment

---

Pediatric Annals Editor-in-Chief Stanford T. Shulman, MD, is the Virginia H. Rogers Professor of Pediatric Infectious Diseases at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and Chief of the Division of Infectious Disease at the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago.

An avid stamp collector, Dr. Shulman chooses relevant stamps from his personal collection to accompany his column each month.

Address correspondence to Stanford T. Shulman, MD, via email: pedann@Healio.com. doi: 10.3928/00904481-20151226-01

---


on a tumor and on a face wound apparently with good results. In 1560, he sent tobacco seeds (with figs, oranges and lemons) to Catherine de Medici, Queen of France, with a letter describing its medicinal properties. The next year he presented Catherine with tobacco leaves and recommended preparing a headache remedy by crushing the leaves into a powder that could be sniffed, and this became popular in the French court, where it also became addictive. Tobacco became cultivated in France and other countries, and in England the crushed leaves became known as snuff. In 1753, Carolus Linnaeus, the Swedish naturalist, named the tobacco plant genus Nicotiana, and the active ingredient of tobacco leaves subsequently was isolated in 1828 and named nicotine. In 1606, Nicot became famous for composing a French dictionary, translated as “Treasures of the French language.”

The other three stamps are from Syria (1998), Italy (1982), and Ethiopia, and each very graphically delivers an antismoking message.

REFERENCES