A few days ago, during a discussion about the adverse effects of cigarette smoking, I heard a graduate student refer to the classic 1964 Public Health Service publication on smoking and health (1) as “The Surgeon General’s Report on Smoking and Health.” This is a serious misnomer, the correct designation being, Smoking and Health: Report of the Advisory Committee to the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service. Because this Report is frequently referred to by its incorrect designation and because this has important policy implications, I want to take this opportunity to comment on the matter.

By 1964, the date of publication of the Advisory Committee’s report, the US Public Health Service had been engaged for 8 years (since 1956) in the investigation of the association between smoking and health (1, pp. 6–7). In 1957, the Surgeon General, Leroy E. Burney, had issued a warning that “… evidence is increasingly … that excessive smoking is one of the causative factors in lung cancer” (1, p. 6). In a 1959 article in the Journal of the American Medical Association, the Surgeon General made the warning more explicit: “The weight of evidence at present implicates smoking as the principal factor in the increased incidence of lung cancer” (2, p. 1835). Nevertheless, as a substantial proportion of the population were smokers and with the powerful influence of the tobacco industry, the tobacco-health controversy became a major public concern.

In 1961, to provide a more broadly based authoritative evaluation of the tobacco-health relation, four major nongovernmental health agencies urged the formation of a Presidential Commission to study the problem and make appropriate recommendations (1, p. 7). In June 1962, the new Surgeon General, Luther L. Terry, proposed the establishment of an expert advisory committee to conduct a comprehensive study and to provide a report of its findings. Selection of the 10-member committee was meticulous and rigorous!

The report of the Advisory Committee, a model of a multidisciplinary evaluation of a health problem, has provided the basis for policy formulation and programmed research strategy in the field of tobacco and health since its publication in 1964. Assuredly, its influence has been enhanced by the independence as well as the expertise of its membership.

REFERENCES


Warren Winkelstein, Jr.