How to Kill Your T Cells Without Really Trying

March 30, 2009 By Richard Ferri, PhD, ANP

I admit it right up front. I hate all tobacco. Second hand smoke killed my late husband, sent my mother to her grave at 71, and I have lost hundreds of patients of to tobacco over the years. In fact, every single person with HIV/AIDS that has died in my clinical practice in the last ten years has died from sort of tobacco related illness. Not one person has died of an opportunistic infection or such. They have died as a result of tobacco.

To push the button in deeper I have sat through countless AA meetings where someone will say that the hardest thing they have ever done is stop smoking. Think about that. It was not slamming heroin or meth, taking pills or drinking booze - it was cigarettes. If that does not humble you I do not know what will. It certainly humbles me. I am talking about hard core recovering junkies and drunks (just like me) who spend decades of their lives drinking and drugging every single day, and yet stopping smoking was harder than putting down the booze and drugs. The very thought of it makes me shiver.

Now to add to this insult is the fact that Big Tobacco wants us “undesirables” dead. They even had a plan. A fucking written plan on how to get more gays, the sick and homeless hooked on tobacco to help kill them.... I mean us. It even had a nice little name - Project Subculture Urban Marketing... also known as Project SCUM. Worse yet when it was discovered Big Tobacco admitted it and got slapped with a magnificently large fine (but that was about it folks) that created the American Legacy Foundation (www.americanlegacy.org). One of the prime missions of the American Legacy Foundation is to “build a world where young people can reject tobacco and anyone can quit.” Go to their website and read the scientific stats, data and studies. It should horrify you. Twelve thousands Americans die DAILY from tobacco and 2000 children pick up this virtually fatal habit every day.

Okay now compare those numbers for the United States *only* with the number of AIDS deaths and new infections WORLDWIDE DAILY....on the planet Earth (not just the USA) 5700 people die of HIV/AIDS worldwide and 6800 become infected. Do the math and compare theses stats with the tobacco stats and it should make you stop dead in your tracks.

Bringing all this closer to home this coming April 6th my late husband should been turning 69 years old yet he died three years ago from the effects of second hand smoke. John never put a cigarette in his mouth in his life and yet tobacco killed him. His job as Vice President of a major

retail store chain required him to travel by air in the days when smoking was allowed on planes (and everywhere else for that matter). Think about anyone sitting on a plane for dozens of hours every month sucking in re-circulated air polluted with smoke. Back in the day the smoking and non-smoking sections of planes were separated by postcard size piece of cardboard that boldly announced where you could smoke and where you could not. Somehow I cannot imagine a postcard size sign having any real impact on the people in that metal flying tube in the sky - can you?

On a daily basis I see patients with HIV/AIDS come into my office reeking of tobacco and wondering why they are not feeling well. Why they have chronic respiratory infections? Why their kids are sick again? Why they cannot afford their insurance co-pays for their meds? When I talk to them about their tobacco abuse (that is the "billable" diagnosis we health care providers have to use in order to get paid for tobacco related issues as outlined by the American Medical Association) most people just glaze right over. We have become our own worst enemy as far as smoking is concerned.

Now before the "it is my right to smoke if I want to" argument come tumbling out of mouths may I ask a simple question? Does anyone have the "right" to get behind the wheel of car after a couple of drinks and drive? Being impaired, let alone drunk or high, is against the law when driving because of the public danger it poses. Exposing others to your tobacco toxins is exactly the same thing. The only difference is the tragic immediate effects of it all. The drunk driver that kills a family of four makes great news copy with horrifying pictures because it happens right after drinking. The husband of 26 years who dies in your arms barely able to breathe on morphine from second hand smoke doesn't sell papers.

We all know we have the right to free speech, but no one has the right to yell "Fire!" in a crowded theater just for fun. Yet somehow smoking gets a pass on this. Even leading AIDS and gay publications giddily accept advertising dollars from Big Tobacco knowing about Project SCUM and Big Tobacco's agenda to kill us. Kind of makes you want to keep your wallet shut at times I hope.

The only "kill" fee (that is a sum of money paid by a publisher to a writer for not running a writer's story even though they have a agreed to do so) I have ever been paid by as a writer was by the leading gay and lesbian magazine - The Advocate - because they were scared that my story on gays and smoking would offend certain advertises. The publisher himself sent me an email and told me in black and white telling my why my piece was hitting the cutting room floor. I told him to take his fucking "kill" fee and shove it up his ass. You ever notice I have never been published in the Advocate again even though that particular editor (Bruce Steele, btw) is long gone? I have.

Living with HIV/AIDS is NOT just about taking pills on a regular basis. It is about life pure and simple. None of us (most assuredly me) are perfect or even close to it. However, the "pill only" mentality of staying alive and well with HIV/AIDS may kill us more than help us in long run.

So if you smoke or love someone that does the next time they light up think about your T cells taking a nose dive because of their addiction, and how Big Tobacco wants you dead. I hope that makes everyone choke just a little.

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