

Fifty years since cigarette-cancer link proved

Half a century ago, a report from the Royal College of Physicians finally convinced the public that cigarettes caused cancer. Why did it take four centuries to show that smoking kills?



PSHE
SCIENCE

HEALTH ADVICE, THEN AND NOW

<p>1 SMOKING 1946</p> <p>More Doctors Smoke CAMELS than any other cigarette!</p>		<p>2012 DISEASES CAUSED BY SMOKING KILL 5.4 MILLION PEOPLE EACH YEAR</p>
<p>2 DRINKING 1940</p> <p>Tip on the Book!</p>		<p>2012 DRINKING DURING PREGNANCY HARMS YOUR BABY</p>
<p>3 HEROIN 1898</p>		<p>2012 A HIGHLY ADDICTIVE ILLEGAL DRUG CAUSING 100% OF DEATHS PER YEAR</p>
<p>4 RADIUM 1908</p>		<p>2012 A GOOD SOURCE OF DEADLY RADIATION</p>

The Elizabethan explorer Sir Walter Raleigh had what his contemporaries thought a very odd habit, picked up on his voyages to the Americas: he smoked tobacco. The pungent herb was, he thought, a powerful defence against diseases, a cure for hunger and a source of comfort and pleasure for everyday life.

Few people in history have ever been more wrong. Four centuries later, we know the sad truth: smoking is a leading cause of deadly diseases and has killed over 100 million people in its long history. On the league table of human disasters, the discovery of the cigarette ranks alongside the Black Death, the 1918 flu pandemic and the Second World War.

But, despite causing death on such an extraordinary scale, the dangers of tobacco were not widely realised for hundreds of years. In the 1660s, smoking was made compulsory at Eton College, in the hope that it would fend off plague. In the 19th Century, tobacco was promoted

by some as a cure for intestinal disorders and tuberculosis. Even as late as the 1940s, cigarette adverts still featured smiling doctors, recommending their favourite brand.

Only in 1962 did the tide of public opinion finally turn. Fifty years ago this week, a scientific report from the Britain's Royal College of Physicians spelled out the firm conclusion of the best research: smoking was a major killer.

Why did it take so long for doctors to discover the truth about cigarettes? The tobacco industry was partly to blame, making huge efforts to mislead the public even as evidence of a link to cancer was starting to appear.

But, even without outside interference, human lifestyles are so varied that it is often very difficult to know when one particular activity out of hundreds is causing an increased chance of disease. And the human body is so complicated that it is impossible to work out the

effects of chemicals by theory alone.

In fact, in the millennia-long history of medicine, doctors have very often been convinced of things that turned out to be completely wrong, sometimes with tragic consequences.

DOCTOR, DOCTOR

Some people even today think medics get more wrong than they get right. The alternative health movement is going strong, rejecting conventional medical treatment in favour of homeopathic remedies or herbal concoctions. Doctors have proved unreliable in the past, say the critics. Why should we trust them now?

Because, doctors reply, although modern medical science is not perfect, it does at least have the capacity to learn from its mistakes. A history of failure has made today's medics understand that only well-designed experiments, rigorous tests and constant scepticism can lead us towards scientific truth.

Q & A

Q If doctors are wrong about everything, what do I do when I'm ill?!

A Doctors certainly are not wrong about everything. Medicine has come a very long way in fifty years, and doctors are the first people to talk to about health concerns.

Q Really? I've heard there's lots of health information online.

A You should be very careful about health information from the internet. Throughout human history, there have been people willing to exploit fears over health to sell useless or harmful 'treatments'. The internet is full of this kind of 'quack medicine'. The

only websites to trust are official sites like NHS direct.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'When it comes to health, instinct is a better guide than science.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► Fifty years since cigarette-cancer link proved

WORD WATCH

Sir Walter Raleigh – Born around the year 1554, Sir Walter Raleigh was one of the earliest and greatest English explorers. He led the first successful colonisation effort in Virginia (named after Elizabeth I, the ‘Virgin Queen’). He also launched two separate expeditions to find the legendary golden city of El Dorado.

Black Death – The Black Death was a devastating outbreak of bubonic plague that is thought to have wiped out around a quarter of the world’s population.

Eton College – Probably the only school where smoking has ever been compulsory, Eton College was founded in 1440 by King Henry VI. Today, it is one of

the UK’s top private boarding schools.

Tragic consequences – One of the most notorious medical mistakes was the thalidomide disaster, when a drug sold to pregnant women turned out to cause serious birth defects in their children. Around 10,000 children were born disabled as a result of the drug.

YOU DECIDE

1. Given the harm they do, should cigarettes be banned completely?
2. Why do we sometimes do things even though we know they do us harm?

ACTIVITIES

1. Research five facts about smoking and create an infographic to present those facts in an interesting way.
2. Imagine you were a scientist in the 1950s. Design an experiment that could prove, conclusively, that cigarettes were causing cancer. It might not be as easy as you think.

 **BECOME AN EXPERT** Check our website for a selection of useful links to videos and further reading.

 **NOTES**

