

Lawyerly Arguments in Thank You for Smoking

By ACSH Staff — March 17, 2006

When anti-smoking Sen. Ortolan Finistirre (presumably D-VT) challenges tobacco industry public relations "hero" Nick Naylor, in the film *Thank You for Smoking*, about the need for a skull and crossbones warning on cigarette boxes, Naylor snipes back that if the senator's goal were really to protect the public health, he'd be trying to put the same warning on artery-clogging cheddar cheese. "The great state of Vermont will not apologize for its cheese!" shouts the indignant, self-righteous senator. It was one of many humorous and memorable lines in this enjoyable film version of the Christopher Buckley novel by the same name. And it's not so different from the public health community's broad anti-industry zealotry, which can obscure real public health problems.

The comparison between cigarettes and cheese is humorous in its absurdity. Yet just this week, ACSH had to explain why sodas are *not* the new cigarettes. Really. And in the real world, as in the movie, it is the tobacco industry, not public health, which benefits from such comparisons.

But the plaintiff's bar would have us believe that food, beverages (alcoholic or simply just caloric), and cigarettes are all dangerous. They don't have the gall to say "equally" dangerous, but it is implied or left to the imagination.

Of course, ACSH reported in 2002 that [the health effects of alcohol consumption and tobacco use are significantly different](#) [1]. Back then, we joked that soon, we'd have to do a similar comparison with tobacco and food. How speedily we've slipped down that slippery slope. An ACSH report contrasting cigarette and food litigation is currently in peer review.

For most of the movie, it seemed that Buckley's 1994 book was already dated: Naylor's friends in the M.O.D. squad, short for "Merchants of Death," included just a firearms lobbyist and alcohol lobbyist. Only at the end of the film did the group grow to include, among others, a fast food flak.

Unwilling to make careful distinctions between different levels of risk, many in the "tobacco control" community are actually trying to *conceal*, if not [mislead](#) [2] us about, [the use of smokeless tobacco as a smoking cessation approach for the inveterate smoker](#) [3].

It's just one of many ways public health suffers from activists' unwillingness to rank risks. For instance, it seems that biotech food, a technology innovation that could help nourish millions, is the new DDT in the eyes of many activists, another lifesaving advance sacrificed for political considerations.

And speaking of food: don't get us wrong. Obesity really is a public health threat. But are Finistirrean warning labels the way to go? The [Center for Science in the Public Health](#) [4] would have us believe so. They've even gone so far as [to plant seeds of doubt about the safety of some of the very tools modern technology is giving us to fight obesity](#) [5].

Spin is everywhere -- but risks and benefits should be weighed and ranked rationally. Don't let the Naylor's from any corner of the PR universe tell you otherwise.

Jeff Stier, Esq., is an associate director of the American Council on Science and Health ([ACSH.org](#) [6], [HealthFactsAndFears.com](#) [7]). Other Fears pieces on Thank You for Smoking appear [here](#) [8], [here](#) [9], [here](#) [10], [here](#) [11], and [here](#) [12].

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