You've Come a Long Way ... or Have You? Popular Women's Magazines Are Still Downplaying the Risks of Smoking

By ACSH Staff — March 1, 1999

Executive Summary

The National Health Council reports that 35 percent of American adults of both sexes rely on magazines for health news. Each month, millions of American women look to their favorite women's magazines as primary sources of health information. This is not surprising: Many consumer magazines devote whole sections of each issue to health topics, and their editors sift through mountains of medical news to bring their readers stories that are both catchy and easy to understand. But in the editorial pursuit of novelty, some important health messages—particularly about the risks of smoking—are often overlooked.

For years the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) has surveyed the accuracy and relevance of the health and smoking coverage in 13 popular women's magazines.* Over the past decade these surveys have noted significant improvements in the magazines' overall health coverage. Today's women's magazines focus less on hyperbole-laden exposés of oddball health scares and more on major causes of disease and death. Blatant promotions of smoking have faded, while mentions of smoking's dangers have increased dramatically. Such mentions were virtually absent 10 years ago.

Despite this progress, however, ACSH's most recent two-year survey (covering the May through September issues of 13 different magazines in both 1997 and 1998, for a total of 130 individual issues) found that popular women's magazines continue to downplay the hazards of cigarette smoking. When compared to the ample spreads given over to such health topics as nutrition and exercise, the space devoted to information about smoking is glaringly scant.

ACSH's latest survey found a decline of more than 50 percent from spring-summer 1997 to spring-summer 1998 in the number of antismoking messages the women's magazines published. (For purposes of the ACSH survey, an "antismoking message" is defined as an article or a mention that discourages smoking. An "article" is defined as a piece of writing that generally exceeds 150 words. A "mention" is defined as a few isolated lines or an editorial comment about smoking that occurs in an article or editorial on a subject other than smoking.)

Smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States today, yet articles about tobacco made up fewer than 1 percent of all the health-related articles in the magazines surveyed in 1997-1998. During this period only one out of 519 health-related articles in the 13 magazines surveyed featured smoking. In contrast, 53 articles—roughly 10 percent—focused on nutrition. Eating a balanced diet is, of course, an important aspect of maintaining one's health, but warnings
about smoking certainly deserve at least as much space as tips on good nutrition.

On the whole, women's magazines send mixed signals about smoking. ACSH's latest survey found relatively few antismoking messages, and the messages that were found were undermined by the magazines' general lack of information on tobacco risks. In some cases, magazines offered inappropriate and unscientific recommendations with regard to tobacco; in other cases, articles about tobacco-related diseases de-emphasized or neglected the role played by smoking.

But far more disturbingly, most popular women's magazines continued to advertise tobacco products even as the magazines' editors proclaimed a commitment to their readers' health. On average, the magazines surveyed carried about three cigarette ads per issue, for a total of 399 such ads over the two 5-month periods covered. In 1997 cigarette ads outweighed antismoking messages by a ratio of six to one; in 1998 that ratio almost doubled, to a rate of 11 cigarette ads for every mention of smoking's risk.

Women's magazines' juxtaposition of tobacco ads with antismoking information may weaken the potentially powerful health messages the magazines' editors seem to want to convey. One page warns readers about the perils of smoking; the next promotes cigarettes. The hypocrisy of magazines' advocating healthy lifestyles while continuing to advertise cigarettes compromises not only the health of America's women, but the credibility of their favorite magazines.

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