

Starting the search

for a 'safer' smoke

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THE PROSPECT of cigarettes containing at least a proportion of synthetic tobacco came a significant step closer yesterday with the announcement that Imperial Tobacco has received the approval of the Government-appointed Hunter Committee to go ahead with consumer testing of its tobacco substitute, New Smoking Material.

Companies

The Hunter Committee was set up by Sir Keith Joseph when he was Secretary of State for Health to investigate the health implications of reducing part of the tobacco content of—particularly—cigarettes by similar substances which produced a smaller amount of tar, with fewer cancer-producing properties and a smoke which was less likely to irritate the throat and lungs.

Behind the setting up of the Committee was the fear of a possible thalidomide situation recurring. By inventing new products which reduced the ingredients of natural tobacco now commonly accepted as potentially harmful, companies run the risk of producing a new unknown danger. It was universally accepted, therefore, that someone in the U.K. had to set down guidelines for testing such products in order to minimise these risks.

That was the task of the Hunter Committee, which has now produced its first set of draft guidelines. These have been given in confidence to the tobacco and chemical companies involved in the development of substitute tobacco substances, and the companies are now analysing their own research work to see how it measures up to the guidelines.

In fact, Imperial has spoken a march on its competitors in being able to announce its con-

sumer testing. As well as feeding in its research data to the Committee—as all companies have done—Imps also asked for clearance to go a step beyond. Since its research goes further than Hunter's initial guidelines it has won the Committee's approval.

It is fair to say that the other companies involved in research into synthetics—and these include Galanese Corporation, Courtaulds, and probably another dozen groups in other parts of the world—are hopping mad at Imps' initiative. Although commercial production of synthetics is at least 18 months away—and the sale to the public of products containing synthetics even further in the future—all the major tobacco groups are aware that if this type of product ever catches on the industry is due for its first real revolution since Sir Walter Raleigh first introduced the product to the then civilised world back in the sixteenth century.

In commercial terms the Hunter guidelines and the consumer tests which Imps will now carry out (followed quite quickly, one assumes, by other tobacco groups) are only a small step along the road. Introducing synthetic materials into a product which, world wide, forms a multi-billion pound industry is playing poker for high stakes. The marketing of tobacco products is one of the toughest jobs in the world and if the smoker does not take to synthetics then all the research and development is wasted.

If, however, the smoker does take to them no-one can afford to be left out of the marketing race. Equally, therefore, the first

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Announcing yesterday that Imperial Tobacco has received the Hunter Committee's approval for the test marketing of its tobacco substitute, Dr. Herbert Bentley, the company's research and development director.

company to manufacture a credible substitute may well scotch the hopes of surviving the tobacco companies. By common consent there are currently two front-runners with Imperial's NSM—developed jointly with ICI—running neck and neck with the Celanese substitute, Cytrel.

Imperial stole a tactical march on Celanese yesterday by announcing that it is the first company in the world to get approval for consumer testing of a synthetic from a Government-appointed body. But since the achievement is not all that

grand, it will be some time before it is clear whether Imperial's new substitute is a winner on a smaller scale.

Questions

Behind this elaborate marketing—when it is considerably further than just Imperial and Celanese—is the debate questions of whether tobacco substitutes are a good idea and if they are, how should they be judged.

The whole concept of synthetic tobacco has received more credence in the U.K. than any

where else. But this only came about after a power struggle within the Department of Health and Social Security. There was, and still is, a faction in the Department which takes the view that smoking is bad and should therefore be discouraged. To this faction anything which claims to make smoking "safer" is anathema because, it is argued, for "safer" the smoker will read "safe."

The other faction takes the view that people will smoke whatever the medical evidence against it, and, therefore, anything that can be achieved to minimise the dangers involved

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is a worthwhile exercise. The setting up of the Hunter Committee in the first place was a victory for this side.

Given the existence of Hunter, the next question is how one should approach the idea of replacing tobacco—a question for those companies who have embarked on making substitutes—and as a corollary, how one should judge the results. That is for Hunter and the health authorities to decide.

Evidence

The vexing part of all this is that Hunter has reached at least tentative conclusions, but that these are confidential. This in turn means that companies will be allowed to test their products on—admittedly willing—consumers without anyone outside those with a commercial interest knowing just what guidelines have been adhered to concerning the safety of the product concerned.

Given that all parties are bending over backwards to ensure that every possible test for safety is done, and that there is fairly conclusive evidence that these substitutes are considerably less likely to cause cancer, bronchitis, or whatever this may not seem too important. On the other hand there are fairly basic differences of approach in the research done by various companies, and without the Hunter guidelines it is difficult to know whose is judged to be following the best line.

To give just one example, Imperial Tobacco has consistently followed the line of simplifying the cellulose molecule, which is the basic component of natural tobacco, in order to produce a substance which is chemically and

biologically as easy to analyse as possible. The Imps view is that everything you take out of cellulose in producing a tobacco substitute compatible with the process of making cigarettes must improve the chances of increasing safety.

Celanese, on the other hand, appears to have adopted a policy of making its product much more like tobacco—although at the same time reducing the carcinogenic and other harmful content to the same sort of degree as Imperial. The difference is that Cytrel is a far more complex substance than NSM and, to the layman, would appear to have much better marketing characteristics. Without published guidelines, however, it is impossible to measure one against the other in terms of health.

Confidential

In spite of the fact that Hunter's conclusions are still confidential some pointers to the Committee's thinking are available. It appears to have taken a fairly tough line on the amount of research that has to be done before a substitute can be put to the public for testing. It appears also that the Committee has decided on a cautious step by step approach—in that further official consideration will be necessary before Imperial or anyone else can venture from consumer testing to commercial test marketing.

It emerges also that Hunter is tending to look more at the product which will finally be offered to the consumer rather than to the basic substitutes which companies are developing. This is in line with Professor Hunter's reputation as a realistic thinker, but when it comes to second and third

generation derivatives of what are essentially first generation substitutes in terms of commercial production, this could pose some problems. Guidelines on the concept of substitutes could, long term, be more valuable than just testing procedures of products which in the foreseeable future are not likely to account for more than one-third of any commercially marketed cigarette.

Guidelines

In the final analysis, however, the Hunter Committee is only an advisory body set up to recommend to the Secretary of State guidelines which should be laid down for the introduction of synthetic smoking materials. As such the Committee's opinions have no legal standing. Although companies like Imperial are seen to be responsible by waiting for Hunter's views, it is doubtful whether their legal position is much enhanced by Hunter's approval for further moves in the highly unlikely event of any unwelcome side effects showing up in the future. For all the companies involved commercial self-interest will be a much more potent factor in ensuring comprehensive testing than any quasi-official guideline.

It is highly probable that these unpleasant issues will remain in the realms of theory, and as far as both tobacco companies and smokers are concerned the real issue is whether synthetics will gain acceptance. The companies have the comforting thought that natural tobacco leaf is likely to be in short supply for some time and an easily-produced substitute, therefore, is appealing. The final court of appeal, however, is the smoker.

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