

# Imperial is given first UK sanction for consumer tests of tobacco substitute

By Maurice Corina  
Industrial Editor

Anglo-American competition to market an acceptable tobacco substitute for cigarettes intensified yesterday when Imperial Tobacco announced it had obtained official clearance to test its material on smokers.

A rival United States product, Cytrel, made by the Celanese Corporation, has yet to receive consent for consumer reaction studies by Imperial's competitors, Gallaher and Carreras-Rothmans.

Testing guidelines laid down by the Government's Hunter Committee on the safety of tobacco substitutes are not being disclosed, even though Imperial's marketing experts will over the next few months begin consumer acceptance studies using up to 6,000 smokers throughout Britain.

It is understood that Gallaher, which has a supply contract with Celanese, is to seek similar sanction. Celanese's limited testing of Cytrel among United States smokers has presumably not been enough for the Hunter Committee, which advises Mrs Castle, Secretary of State for Social Services, and has no jurisdiction outside the United Kingdom.

With their eyes on valuable export business as well as replacing at least 10 per cent of expensive dollar leaf imports, Imperial is confident that brands containing its grey substitute, made from Finnish wood pulp, will be on general sale by 1976.

The original Imperial Developments company, formed to exploit initial research done by Imperial Chemical Industries, has now been renamed New Smoking Materials Ltd. The shareholding is two thirds ICI and one-third Imperial, with the former holding the patents and the joint concern earning royalties on bulk sales.

Production of the British material is scheduled to begin next year at an Imperial Tobacco factory being built at Ardeer, Ayrshire, at a cost of £12m. Up to 30 million lb annually will be made under licence from NSM. To date, Imperial and ICI have jointly invested £4.5m in research and development, the results of which have been screened by the expert Hunter Committee for potential health hazards.

Dr Herbert Bentley, Imperial's research director, said yesterday: "We believe NSM is the first substitute smoking material in the world to receive clearance for consumer acceptance studies from a government-appointed body."

Seven years of research had shown encouraging results. The material was considerably less in tar content than equivalent weights of tobacco, a tar with much reduced biological activity, and a less irritant smoke.

Dr Bentley said that it would not have been proper to proceed with obtaining smokers' reactions without the Hunter Committee assessment of research data. That Imperial was now able to move forward to this stage in development of marketing plans was "highly encouraging".

"These developments can clearly be seen as a breakthrough for British enterprise", he said. "The sale of NSM in the United Kingdom could save valuable foreign currency and sales to overseas markets could contribute substantially to improving the United Kingdom balance of payments."

It was Dr Bentley's hope that the test data could eventually be published for the general scientific community. But at the present time the Hunter Committee had requested that its safety guidelines be kept confidential.

Mr Sid Duckham, Imperial's marketing director, explained that results of consumer sampling to be taken throughout the United Kingdom would be evaluated by the end of November. The mixture of NSM with tobacco in cigarettes used for the tests will range up to 50 per cent.

It is understood Imperial's present thinking is that, given satisfactory consumer results, new brands will be developed. Unlike Cytrel, which has been treated to give it a golden colour (and is therefore a less simple product for Hunter to evaluate), NSM will be mixed in with real leaf in its original grey form.

Celanese's rival product is available in grey, but it seems hopes are pinned to marketing the American supplement in a form whereby smokers cannot tell any difference. Gallaher and Carreras are clearly impressed with Celanese's strategy in negotiating their five-year deals to be supplied from a plant now being built in America, with another scheduled for Europe as markets build up.

Both NSM and Cytrel are derived from modified cellulose with wood pulp as the source. Although the rivals have registered patents—the ICI-Imperial material is closely protected on the heat treatment arrangements—neither can be certain that disputes may not arise.

Other companies are also developing materials, including Courtaulds, which was criticized last year for testing Planet cigarettes in the Midlands ahead of Hunter Committee approval.

NSM has been sent to laboratories in Germany and the United States for further evaluation by the scientific community.

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