

18th August 1975

COMMENTS ON FIGURES QUOTED BY DR. M.A.H. RUSSELL

Certain questions have been raised concerning the use of various statistics by Dr. Russell. In particular he stated in a recent talk (1) that 'after smoking one cigarette, only 15% of people avoid becoming dependent on cigarettes'. This could be taken to imply that only 15% of non-smokers have ever smoked, and this seems unlikely. In consequence the use of this figure and several others used by Russell has been investigated.

In a paper published in 1971 (2), Russell stated that 'only 15% of adolescents who smoke more than one cigarette avoid becoming regular smokers'. He then goes on to say that 'three out of four current smokers either wish to or have tried to stop smoking, yet only about one in four succeeds in becoming a permanent non-smoker'. Later he states that 'intermittent or occasional cigarette smoking occurs in about 2% of smokers'. The reference given for all these statements is to McKennell and Thomas (3). When this publication is consulted the following information is found:-

Adolescents - 16 - 20 years old.

Adults - over 20 years old.

TABLE 1

	All Adolescents	All Adults
	%	%
1. Never Smoked at all	19	16
2. Smoked once only	18	11
3. Smoked, but never as much as one cigarette per week for one month	13	9
4. Smoked at least one cigarette per week for at least one month, but never regularly	8	2
5. Smoked regularly	42	61
6. No answer, can't remember, etc.		1

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Therefore 58% of adolescents and 39% of adults have never smoked regularly. (A regular smoker is defined as one who smoked at least one cigarette per day (or the equivalent in tobacco)).

Category 4 (Table 1) smokers are referred to as occasional smokers McKennell and Thomas conclude that 'only just over a quarter of those who have one smoke manage to avoid becoming regular smokers'.

TABLE 2

	Adolescents	Adults
1. Would you like to give up smoking if you could do so easily?	49	45
2. Have you ever tried to give up smoking altogether?	61	52

Figures are for percentages of smokers answering 'yes' to each question.

TABLE 3

	Adolescents	Adults
	%	%
<u>Dissonant Smokers</u>		
Wish and tried to give up	49 { 38	45 { 30
Wish and not tried to give up	11	15
<u>Consonant Smokers</u>		
Not wish now but tried in the past to give up.	51 { 22	55 { 22
Neither wish nor tried to give up	29	33

Figures are also given by McKennell and Thomas for the total number of smokers (78%) and ex-smokers (22%).

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At first sight it would appear that most of these figures differ from those quoted by Russell. On closer examination it is, however, possible to surmise that he has performed certain calculations on these figures.

From Table 1 it seems that Russell has used only the smokers in category 3 (those who have smoked more than one cigarette but cannot be classed as occasional smokers). 81% of the adolescent sample have smoked at least one cigarette (by excluding category 1) and 13% are in category 3. Thus, 16% ($\frac{13}{81}$) of the adolescents who have ever smoked more than once have avoided becoming regular (or occasional) smokers. This has presumably been rounded down to 15% by Russell.

During the talk given by Russell (1), reference was made to those people who smoke one cigarette and avoid becoming dependent. One must assume that he in fact meant to refer to adolescents smoking more than one cigarette.

It could be said that the use which Russell makes of the statistics is misleading, but the paper referring to these figures is very carefully worded. He has also used this type of approach when considering smokers who wish to or have tried to give up smoking (for whom a figure of 75% is suggested).

From Table 2 it would appear, superficially, that the figure should be nearer 50% (averaging for questions 1 and 2). Russell seems, however, to have used the figures shown in Table 3. If those who neither wish, nor have tried, to give up smoking are excluded and the figures for other smokers are summed we find that 71% of adolescents and 67% of adults wish to or have tried to give up smoking. This has presumably been rounded up to 75%. The figure of 22% given by McKennell and Thomas for ex-smokers (as a percentage of those who have smoked regularly) is presumed to be the 'one

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in four who succeed in giving up smoking' to whom Russell refers.

The figure of 2% for occasional smokers is taken directly from McKennell and Thomas and refers to adults only.

The figures quoted by Russell appear, therefore, to be broadly correct but have been presented in a novel way in order to make specific points. He is obviously more meticulous about the wording of his statements when they are to appear in print than when they are delivered verbally.

The assumption, from Russell's statements, that only 15% of non-smokers have ever smoked is not valid. The definition of non-smokers is often taken to include ex-smokers who may have been dependent on cigarettes in the past but who do not smoke at present. When the data of McKennell and Thomas are considered it further appears that Russell means to exclude those people who have smoked once only and those who are occasional smokers. In fact it appears that of the present non-smokers (categories 1, 2 and 3 in Table 1) $62\% \left(\frac{18 + 13}{19 + 18 + 13} \right)$ of adolescents and 55% of adults have ever smoked. It should be noted, of course, that these figures refer to statistics published in 1967.

REFERENCES

1. See AKC's note on File 46J, 14th July, 1975
2. Russell M.A.H. B.M.J. (1971) 8th May, 330-331.
3. McKennell A.C. and Thomas R.K. Adults' and Adolescents' Smoking Habits and Attitudes. Government Social Survey, London, H.M.S.O. (1967).

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