

Is Indoor Tanning the Next Tobacco?

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Is Indoor Tanning the Next Tobacco? – extended abstract

Marketers of indoor tanning services have directed major promotional efforts toward young adults, and their tactics in pursuing this market segment have been limited by only weak regulation (Greenman and Jones 2010). Although most young indoor tanners acknowledge the link between skin cancer and tanning, they desire the immediate benefits of a tan and regard skin cancer as a distant threat, something as hard for them to imagine as old age itself (Hillhouse 2011). The authors compare the marketing practices of the indoor tanning industry with the practices of the tobacco industry prior to present day regulations. The marketing practices of the tanning industry appear to exploit young adult tanners by positioning this hazardous service as socially desirable, much as did pre-regulation smoking industry practices in an earlier day. It is anticipated that regulation for the indoor tanning industry will increase, as the severity and frequency of the health consequences associated with the practice become more publicly known. This increase in regulation may come very soon, since today, worldwide there are more skin cancer cases attributed to indoor tanning than there are lung cancer cases attributed to tobacco use (Wehner et al. 2014).

The Parallels with the Marketing of Tobacco

A disturbing feature of recent tanning industry promotion to the youthful market is its obvious similarity to the now forbidden practices of marketing tobacco to young smokers (Greenman and Jones 2010). Tanning bed marketing has followed the example of R.J. Reynolds' infamous "Joe Camel" advertising campaign

which contributed to the drastically increased rate of teen smoking and the Camel market share by providing an avenue for teenagers to enhance their self-presentation (Greenman and Jones 2010). As Greenman and Jones (2010) illustrate, younger women have been targets of indoor tanning promotion as well as tobacco advertising. Cohen (2000) recounted the nearly unanimous opinion of tobacco industry spokespeople that teenagers begin smoking as a result of peer influence and as a means of impression management, even to the extent that teen smokers “wear” their cigarettes as part of their social persona. In a similar way the tanning industry and media have linked the tanned appearance with social acceptance, slenderness and body appearance (Cafri et al. 2006).

A second, less publicized and more controversial, similarity of smoking and tanning is the potential addictive nature of the practices. Although not all researchers are in agreement, there is significant evidence that tanning produces addictive endorphins (Holman et al. 2013). Just as with smoking, tanning bed use may not only be rewarding but also addictive, with the future consequences so remote that the perceived health costs of the present behavior are outweighed by the social benefits.

Parallels in promotional tactics by the tobacco and tanning industries are also apparent and range from specially priced introductory offers, to promising to improve your appearance and sex appeal, to using health based advertising claims. Tobacco companies once featured attractive movie stars smoking and hired physician figures to tout their brand’s healthy lack of throat irritation (“not a cough

in a carload” for Old Gold Cigarettes) and the “safer” low tar and nicotine delivered by filtered brands (Viceroy cigarettes). Similarly, until restricted by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in 2010 (FTC 2010, Roller and Olsen, 2010), the tanning industry touted the healthfulness of the vitamin D produced by tanning and employed beautiful, young, fashionable models to deliver its messages promoting the tanned appearance (Greenman and Jones, 2010.) Furthermore some advertisements claimed that indoor tanners could develop healthful “base tans” to prevent sunburn and that the controlled exposure to radiation possible with tanning beds (“98.5% UV-B free”) is healthier than actual solar tanning. Finally, both the tobacco and tanning bed industries have promoted the physical pleasure, relaxation and enhanced good feelings associated with their product’s use, though neither industry appears to have promoted these as the major product benefit.

Perhaps the most damaging accusation against both the tobacco and the tanning industries is that both have failed to adequately inform consumers of the long term dangers, and both industries have denied, diminished or suppressed information which could warn potential users of the dangers their products pose (Loh 2008). Tobacco firms have argued that the dangers of smoking have been well known since at least 1954 (Geyelin 1998), that consumers have chosen to smoke for pleasure of their own free will (Schane, Glantz, and Ling 2009), and for this reason the industry should not be held responsible for damages. Laux (2000) strongly disagreed with the tobacco industry’s claim that smokers make informed decisions, saying that advertising and peer social pressures have played a major role in

promoting smoking to young people who have inaccurately evaluated and optimistically discounted the seriousness of the potential future harm to their health. Supporting this viewpoint were Chapman and Liberman (2005) who argued for tobacco regulation based on the fact that many smokers actually had poor awareness of the multitude and morbidity of health problems caused by smoking and the likelihood of becoming a victim oneself. Furthermore, since many had become addicted at a minor age, as an adult they had never been given the opportunity to make a rational and informed decision about smoking, and the same holds true for indoor tanning.

Miller et al. (1990) found an optimistic bias in college students' judgment of the long term risks of sun tanning, with the heaviest tanners perceiving the least risk. As in the case of tobacco use, young individuals not only discount future threats, but have been shown to very poorly understand the nature of the threats posed by indoor tanning.

If public policy advocates recognize the potential addictiveness of tanning and the level of social pressure to tan, in conjunction with individuals' inability to judge the extent of the long term dangers of tanning, regulation of the tanning industry will likely follow. The regulation of the promotion of tanning would have huge marketing implications for the industry, as well as for media which have profited from the advertising revenue.

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