

*A grass-roots, non-directed movement makes its mark*

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# Seeking a non-smoking lifestyle in an East London youth club

Starting in September 1989 the author (a college lecturer in human physiology at the time) joined the voluntary staff of the Plaistow Youth Club of Newham, an East London borough.

From time to time the young people — almost exclusively male but not by requirement — were given the opportunity to discuss such health issues as 'safer' sex and drug abuse. At one such gathering in mid-1990, the author was regaled by a group of eight or nine boys with tales of the difficulties they had caused a recent speaker at their school who had come to teach them about the dangers of smoking. To my query: "Why did you send him up? Didn't you believe him?" the general reply was along the lines that they had become blasé about seeing such things as photographs of tobacco-blackened lungs excised from victims of cancers, emphysema, etc.

This reaction interested me, especially the comment that such talks tended to evoke exaggerated bravado from the boys and calculatedly insensitive comments about death and dying, designed to upset the speaker but tending also to lead some boys to experiment more carelessly than they otherwise might have done. I mentioned to them that a number of research studies had suggested that their reaction was not unusual and that it had been established that the best way to bring about a change in people's behaviour was to demonstrate positive reasons for doing a particular thing rather than to provide commentary on the negative effects of not doing so. Not unnaturally they did not seem particularly fascinated by the intricacies of behaviourism, so I left the topic at that point. However, some weeks

later two of the older lads (both eighteen years of age and both smokers) suggested to me that it might be a good idea to see if "kids who don't smoke get more out of life than we do". It must be emphasised that this idea came from them, not from me.

### A self-generated initiative

It was a splendid idea and I immediately set about thinking about how best to set it up so as to have maximum empirical impact and validity. At the same time, I did not want to take over from the boys what could become essentially a self-generated health promotion initiative. As comments which I made about sampling, statistical problems and the like seemed greatly to decrease the initial enthusiasm for the project, I encouraged the boys to see what they could do to set the thing in motion, indicating that I would co-operate as required.

Again a long interval of time elapsed before the issue was raised, by which time one of the original instigators had left the club. In October 1990 his colleague told me that he knew of four boys in the club who had decided to give up smoking as it was interfering with their football performance. Indeed, one of these four claimed that cigarettes "gave him asthma" and that he had not had it prior to smoking. The four concerned had given up (successfully) during the previous year and — three of them in particular — had attracted considerable attention to themselves in the club by ostentatiously complaining about smoking by both staff and fellow club members in the billiards room and in various other parts of the club premises.

*"Do kids who don't smoke get more out of life than we do?"*

*An extremely defensive reaction.*

I asked them if they wished to speak about their experiences with smoking. They expressed reluctance about doing so by themselves, but commented that socially they spent a lot of time with kids in their school who had never taken up smoking and that they "seemed to do different sorts of things" after school than did the smokers.

A quick informal survey in February 1991 of the rather variable membership of the youth club turned up 17 (out of 50 or 60) non-smokers. Of these, two claimed to "hang around" with smokers, but the other 15 had developed avoidance strategies for keeping away from the smokers. The reasons given were interesting and included "Don't like the smell" (9), "They're not nice" (3), "They're boring" (12), "They're always talking about nicking cigarettes from the machines" (4), etc. The numerals in parentheses refer to the number of members who mentioned the foregoing observations.

### Perceptions of difference

In other words, even the non-smoking members perceived — whether accurately or otherwise — a distinct behavioural difference between smokers and non-smokers in their club. To what extent were the smokers aware of the non-smokers' perception of them? How would they react to the opportunity to discuss it?

With questions like this in mind, I met again with three of the four ex-smokers and asked if they would like to take part in a discussion about smoking with an equal number of smokers at a formal debate for the entire membership. I pointed out that I had not yet approached any of the smokers, but would do so if they wanted me to. The 'sense of the meeting', to paraphrase Quaker religious terminology, was that they would happily involve themselves if I organised participants from the smoking group! Accordingly I informally canvassed some of the smokers — either in small groups or individually — to see if they wished to put up three of their number for a discussion about smoking.

The initial reaction was extremely defensive. Most commented that they knew "it is no good for your health" but many of those felt that they were being "got at" by being asked to discuss it. After some weeks of trying to get up a team of three on the smoking side, I had to make do with two. Although the issue was explained on several occasions as *not* being an attack on their lifestyle, but simply a discussion, both of the

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boys concerned told me that they were equipped to take a legal line — basically "if I want to smoke, it's my business and no one can stop me". I was surprised that neither one was willing to raise the perfectly valid argument that a direct causal link had not actually been discovered between anything in the tobacco and cancer, even though I acquainted them with it. Indeed, both boys were surprised, one saying "You mean, there ain't no proof?"

As succinctly as I could, I explained the overwhelming statistical evidence and even told them the story of John Snow and the Broad Street pump in order to show the analogy with the argument concerning dirty water and cholera. One of them had gone to the trouble of getting leaflets from FOREST, the Smokers' Rights lobby, in which the 'non-proven physiological link' argument was developed. However, neither felt sufficiently at home with that argument to use it and they settled for the more hostile 'legal entitlement' approach.

Since there were only two to argue the smokers' side, I then went back to the three non-smokers and told them that they could only pick two to present their case. They did so. However, the next week I was met at the door by one of the non-smokers who informed me that both of the 'smokers' reps' had informed them that they were "gonna chuck it [smoking] and didn't see no sense in discussing it!"

### A better deal

This was a turn-up for the books, and I hurriedly contacted the smokers to see if they had been correctly reported. They both agreed that they had. One went so far as to say that every time he tried to think of an argument *for* smoking, he realised that he did not really wish to smoke himself and felt that the non-smokers had a much better deal. When asked to elaborate on this, he commented that they were not "always being hassled to find cigarettes" and had "more money and freedom". When I invited him to make these observations publicly, he declined.

Early in April 1991 I put up a more colourful set of posters (replacing existing stock) advising people as to where to go for help in quitting smoking if they wanted to. Under each of the six posters I printed in large block capitals *NON-SMOKERS GET MUCH MORE OUT OF LIFE — ASK ONE*. At the last meeting in April, I stood up as the disco ended, but before people had left, and asked if anyone had noticed the

*'Tolerant, non-judgmental and welcoming.'*

signs. Amid considerable shouting, jostling and cat-calls, a large number of hands went up. I then announced that anyone who wanted to hear people speak on the advantage of not smoking would be given the opportunity to so indicate by signing a sheet in the foyer. Within a week, 51 boys had signed up. My original intention — I had hoped that maybe a dozen would sign up — was to take those interested to hear a speaker at Central Middlesex Hospital. However, the large amount of interest indicated that a session should be convened right there at the Youth Club.

The Youth Club management was extremely negative about the idea. It was explained to me that they felt their brief was to be 'tolerant, non-judgmental and welcoming' so that kids would find the Youth Club to be a 'safe' alternative to hanging about in the streets. They held this view — one which, by and large, I supported — so strongly that they had gone on record as refusing to accede to parental requests to ask designated members to go home at bedtime and had made it clear that they would not co-operate with the police (who frequently visited!) beyond what they were actually legally obliged to do. They therefore felt very ill-at-ease about allowing the place to be used for an 'anti-smoking rap'. Outside speakers would definitely *not* be allowed.

### A 'rap about smoking'

By the commencement of the summer vacation (July 1991), they had agreed that if mass interest was still evident in September (when the Club re-opened) they would allow me to hold a 'Rap about smoking' provided:

(a) I did not preach (!!)

(b) The kids were free to say what they wanted.

I agreed with both of these conditions, for by then interest, far from waning, had intensified. Members were even stopping me in the street and asking me when I was going to organise the "thing" about smoking.

When the Club re-opened on 9 September 1991 I put up a list, *again* asking people to sign if they were interested in a 'Rap about smoking' at the Youth Club, chaired by me and one of the management committee, but at which neither of us would say much. It would be up to the audience as to how the Rap would go. That notice attracted 24 signatures. I had been told that unless at least 20 signed up, the management committee would not allow it to go ahead. Moreover,

*At times, the event reminded me rather amusingly of a 'revival' meeting.*

that fact was not to be made clear on the sign-up sheet so that pressure to sign would not be entailed.

The actual Rap was held on 24 September 1991 — a Tuesday and ordinarily a quiet night. Somewhat in excess of 40 rather noisy teenagers — not all of them members, I was told — packed the room set aside for the Rap. An older man, about 25 or so, stood up to speak on a couple of occasions, but was shouted down amid considerable laughter. It was claimed to me afterwards that he was known to a number of the members as being involved in promoting a particular brand of cigarette, and was often seen at sporting fixtures sponsored by that company. He left after about 20 minutes. This was not in any way seen as unusual — the whole event was highly informal with people wandering in and out at will.

### Finding a balance

What was noticeable was that my original four non-smokers (for the three had been re-joined by their comrade) assumed a high profile in the proceedings. At times, the event reminded me rather amusingly of a 'revival' meeting, with youngsters standing up and saying how much better life was without cigarettes. The number of lager cans evident suggested that temperance did not appear to be a dominant theme, but the anti-smoking sentiment was extremely strong. I had assumed (as had the social worker on the platform with me from the management) that 'non-smoking' might be articulated by a sizeable number, with an aggressive smokers' rights input as well, but as the event would have it, I had a hard time as Chairman to find a balance in the rowdy discussion.

Interest in the event noticeably dissipated after about 45 minutes, with conspicuously more people walking out than in. I therefore called the meeting to an end, but not before one of my original committee of four ex-smokers had suggested — to loud acclamation — the formation of a 'Non-Smokers' Club'. This has not yet taken off as a separate entity, but I have on three occasions since then been invited by the members to give talks about smoking and health. Two of the talks were largely epidemiological (appropriately simplified), but one was called 'Smoking, Money and Politics' and dealt with such issues as smokers' lobbies in Parliament, advertising, etc. That one attracted a great deal of interest and I have persistently been

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asked to repeat it. However, the management has refused permission on the (not unreasonable) grounds that it could be construed as political. My argument that the facts do not reflect particularly advantageously on any of the political parties has not been accepted!

### Counter-productive?

However, a number of the members themselves have become non-smoking activists in the Club, pinning up non-smoking notices such as *I don't mind if you smoke, if you don't mind if I fart; Smoking is a dying habit; Have a fag—keep the undertaker happy*, etc. Some of these materials are professionally produced, obviously from one or more anti-smoking organisations, whilst others are hand-produced.

I have had nothing whatever to do with supplying these materials, and the only slogan I did suggest was never taken up as it was regarded as 'not funny enough' — *You may think you're a smoker. But you ain't. The cigarette does the smoking and you're just the mug at the other end.*

The significant issue is that this entire development has been adolescent-inspired and adolescent-led. It suggests to me that possibly much of the 'top-down' work with which health promotion workers get involved may be incorrectly conceived and even counter-productive. Alternatively, once a health advocacy sub-group becomes identified and is given non-directive encouragement, it can become a most effective and sustained instrument for health promotion.

(Asked for any updates before this article was printed, Professor MacDonald reported that one of his group of reformed smokers has regressed, but that there are further encouraging signs. The club's designated no-smoking areas, previously ignored, are now popularly enforced — he observed an example of this when the weight-lifting supervisor, coming into one of these, was told by the boys to extinguish his cigarette! We look forward to further reports from Newham, and news of any other examples of self-generated health promotion will be welcome. — Ed.)

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