Fighting the Pushers in Minority America

Caswell A. Evans Jr.
Urban health is really a matter of minority health, especially as we look at our large urban cities. Unless we include the suburban metropolis, urban health in cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Detroit is really minority health, and minority health is dependent upon minority culture. Therefore, an issue that greatly affects urban health is that of the Pushers.

We all are familiar with the Pushers in our society, the drug pushers especially. Easy accessibility of illegal drugs is thrust upon our communities, especially in inner-city areas. Victims are ensnared by the promise of euphoria to mask their blighted neighborhoods, continual unemployment, and uncertain futures. Children are lured into this process with the prospect of financial rewards and peer esteem.

It is estimated that 500,000 drug users in this country have a serious drug problem, which is defined as the use of drugs four times a week or more. In 1988, a total of 6,756 deaths in our country were attributed to drug-related problems. Of the victims, 46% were white, 30% were African-American, 13% were Hispanic, and 11% were "minorities, undefined." The effects of drug use permeate our society, resulting in vicious circles of disease, crime, and economic deprivation. Especially frightening is the use of crack cocaine and heroin combinations, and the so-called "designer drugs," in Los Angeles.

However, there is a more covert form of pusher in our society: the corporate pusher. The tobacco and alcohol industries in particular have a subtle and sinister impact upon urban and minority health. While the street corner drug pusher represents clearly illegal activity, the tobacco and alcohol pushers are cloaked in a veil of legitimacy. The street corner drug pusher attracts an audience of passersby; the tobacco and alcohol pushers attract an audience in the millions. The most common form of advocacy pursued by the corporate pusher is advertising. Tobacco and alcohol companies use state-of-the-art advertising campaigns largely targeted toward minorities. Slick magazine ads use subliminal sexual suggestion and portray glamorous images of smoking and drinking. Particularly interesting is the ad which tells the African-American woman, "You've come a long way, baby." The theme is freedom of expression—freedom of visibility, freedom of dress, and freedom to smoke. Black women have, in fact, come a long way: lung cancer rates among women now rival those of men. The question for African-American women, as for all women, is: as they've come a long way, what is their future in terms of disease and cancer?

Also noteworthy is the ad which taunts: "You must be daring to smoke brown cigarettes." That is particularly interesting; brown people smoking brown cigarettes. The ad is stylish; it appeals to our "Tinseltown" image.

The Hispanic community is also a target of the corporate pushers. Machismo is a major cultural theme capitalized upon in advertisements to Hispanic males. The tough guy in a cowboy hat with a cigarette dangling from his mouth is an image with which we are all familiar.

Minority-specific magazines may forcefully espouse freedom, human rights, and equality, but because they receive significant advertising revenue from the tobacco and alcohol industries, they deliver unhealthy commercial messages that are equally forceful. Even beyond the commercial messages, dependency upon support from these pusher industries may affect the subject matter, content, and conclusions of feature articles. Can a minority-oriented magazine risk publishing a factual article on the impact of smoking when major commercial support is provided by that industry? Even editorial positions may be affected. Such commercial investment clearly attracts new consumers, but it buys silence as well.

Billboards use similar commercial techniques, but the corporate pushers exploit children's naivety by marketing their products near schools. An informal study showed that visually accessible billboards surrounded six out of ten minority-based schools in Los Angeles. Twenty-two billboards pushing smoking and alcohol could be easily seen while standing within the school boundaries. The greatest number of such billboards were
found near the high schools. Smoking was depicted by cartoon-like characters, and the use of smokeless tobacco was portrayed as a desirable practice. There was only one billboard near a school advertising health with its message, "Milk does a student body good."

Corporate pushers use other forms of advertising as well. Television and radio commercials are strategically aired to encourage impressionable viewers and listeners, especially young people, to participate in the lifestyles associated with the rich or famous. The goal of any pusher is profit. The street corner pusher exchanges drugs for money, and the corporate pusher exchanges advertising for financial returns. The National Cancer Institute estimates that the tobacco industry spends more than $1 billion annually to promote smoking. The greater part of the promotional campaign is aimed at younger people, especially minorities.

Newspaper cigarette coupons entice those on limited incomes. While professional sports teams and city councils sponsor many youth activities, prominent advertisements for cigarettes, and sometimes alcohol, appear in stadiums and sports magazines. Even the postal system is used to promote unhealthy behavior.

Corporate pushers also buy legislative tolerance. In the last two years, California legislators accepted over $200,000 from the Tobacco Institute. This obviously places the legislators in a position of conflict concerning health legislation. Nevertheless, last year Californians passed Proposition 99, an initiative which imposes a substantial tax on tobacco sales. The proceeds are targeted to various health needs. The tobacco industry spent millions in an unsuccessful attempt to defeat the initiative. The tax revenue has been used for expansion of services to the needy through funding of primary care clinics, prenatal care, private hospitalization, physicians, emergency care, and health education. Proposition 99 also provides that a portion of the tax revenue be used in health promotion campaigns to help smokers stop smoking.

The statistics of alcohol and tobacco use are staggering. Over 200,000 deaths annually in the United States are believed to be alcohol-related. Trauma associated with the use of alcohol is the leading cause of death of young people between the ages of 1 and 19 years. Alcohol consumption is related to alcoholism, traffic casualties, psychoses, cirrhosis of the liver, cardiovascular problems, certain cancers, birth defects, and malnutrition. The incidence of alcohol-related problems is higher in the African-American and Native American communities, where cirrhosis death rates are, respectively, two and four times that of the total population. There is also a higher prevalence of alcohol disorders among Hispanic men than among white men.

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In this country, 300,000 to 500,000 deaths per year are related to the use of tobacco. These include lung cancer, emphysema, heart disease, stroke, low birth weight, and respiratory diseases. The use of tobacco is disproportionately higher in minority groups. Of all African-Americans, 35% smoke, and 70% of heart attacks in women under 50 years of age are attributed to smoking. These figures are discouraging, for the age-adjusted death rate from coronary heart disease in African-American women is 22% higher than for white women. In terms of total health care costs, tobacco- and alcohol-related diseases account for up to $185 billion each year.

Any drug pusher represents a public health problem. However, the sophisticated corporate pushers present a significantly greater challenge to public and urban health. No single response can successfully meet their challenge. In California, tax initiatives were approved by the voters to discourage the use of tobacco and alcohol. Public health groups, such as the American Public Health Association, continue to lobby for legislation in the interest of public health. The media, which has been used effectively by corporate pushers, can also be used equally effectively to counteract their messages. At the local level, communities and school boards must recognize the issues of alcohol and cigarette advertising in relation to the school. Creative strategies can minimize premature deaths generated by the ubiquitous pushers. The health of our minority communities, especially the legacy of our children, depends upon our success.