

Using examinations to promote tobacco? Question No. 56 of the Common General Test of the Advanced Level examination of 2005

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The Common General Test of the GCE Advanced Level examination of 2005 carried a question that deserves attention, for it illustrates the subtlety with which tobacco industry propaganda is placed.

The question was as follows in the English version of this paper.

A group of people who support smoking says that the significant beneficial effects of smoking occur primarily in the area of mental health and the habit originates in a search for contentment. The life expectancy of people has increased greatly in recent years. It is possible that the relaxation and contentment and enjoyment produced by smoking have lengthened many lives, smoking is therefore beneficial they conclude. Which one of the following, if true weakens the above conclusion?

1. That cigarettes are the major health hazard, cannot be traced to the willful act of any human organisation.
2. The government earns millions of money from the tobacco tax and tens and thousands of civilians are employed in the tobacco industry.
3. The evidence cited in the statement covers only one example of the effect of cigarette smoking.
4. No mention is made of possible harmful side-effects of smoking.
5. No statistical evidence has proven a link between smoking and longevity.

What does this question convey to young minds? The tobacco and alcohol industries attempt to portray and promote their products in a positive light, associating them with “pleasure”. They also attempt to portray users of such substances as fun, sophisticated, stylish and handsome.

The legal industries (tobacco and alcohol) also attempt to improve their corporate image by claiming that they provide employment and increase government income. These organisations also try to discredit the negative health and other effects of their products by questioning research findings.

The stem of the question above specifically deals with a positive message of tobacco use. It tries to camouflage the fact that more than half of all tobacco users die of a tobacco related disease, and that half of those who die, do so in their middle age. None of the deadly diseases caused by tobacco are mentioned in any of the question’s responses.

It is well known that the tobacco industry agreed to pay billions of dollars to the State Governments of the United States, when they instituted legal action against the industry for knowingly marketing and selling a lethal product. Those who followed this landmark case in the late 1990s would remember the contents of the industry documents that were made public following a court order.

These documents, among other things, showed how the tobacco industry targetted its marketing to very young people [1], how the industry’s own evidence related to the carcinogenicity of tobacco smoke was hidden for over 50 years [1], how they recruited public relations firms to rubbish the scientific evidence on the harm of second-hand smoke [1], how paid moles were placed in prestigious agencies such as the WHO and in editorial boards of prestigious medical journals [2,3], how the industry itself helped cigarette smugglers in order to expand their markets [4], and how policy makers and the media were manipulated to prevent effective tobacco control policies being implemented [5]. This is hardly the history of a “human” organisation referred to in the question.

The tobacco industry takes great pains to point out that tobacco brings money to the government and that it provides jobs to people. These claims are not new. They are repeatedly made by the tobacco industry worldwide. Such claims are made to improve the corporate image of the industry and prevent effective policies that reduce the harm from tobacco being implemented. Studies carried out by respected economists, published by the World Bank show that tobacco is a net loss to any economy [6,7], and that the actual number “employed” by the tobacco trade is miniscule in contrast to their claims. The number employed in tobacco growing and manufacturing in Sri Lanka, has been calculated to be less than 20 000 [8].

These studies also show that though the gross income to a government from tobacco may seem huge, when the costs are calculated it becomes a net loss. So much so that the World Bank itself recommends that all governments should take steps to reduce tobacco consumption and goes on recommend effective policies to do so [6,7].

Response 3 is irrelevant, as the stem does not indicate any negative impact of tobacco. Responses 4 and 5 are mere cover-ups that do not counter the stem or the impact of responses 1 to 3. Response 3 is also watered down by adding the word “possible” before “harmful effects”.

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We should begin to take notice such subtle but powerful methods used by the licit and illicit drug industries operating worldwide.

As many users of these substances die or fall ill daily, these industries need to capture new customers. Most of these new users are children within the school systems of this country. Hence the Ministry of Education, and its Examinations Department have a great responsibility in protecting schoolchildren, especially those who cannot comprehend the subtleties of indirect promotion of drug use.

The tobacco industry's "prevention" campaign which says that "Smoking is not for those under 18" is one such example. There is ample evidence internationally that this message creates the impression that smoking is an adult habit and smokers who are under 18 are rule-breakers. Such impressions increase the attraction of smoking to teenagers [9].

Of the approximately 200 000 sitting for this examination, only around 80 000 qualify. The majority of those taking this exam do not appropriately comprehend and answer the questions correctly. Those who are responsible for setting questions in such exams should consider the possible impressions that may be created by questions in those 120 000 who do not qualify, i.e. those who do not comprehend these questions appropriately. My first reaction was to read this question a second and third time, as there seemed to be no clear answer. This may have been the reaction in those appearing for the exam, further imprinting the stem in their minds.

Significantly, all students sitting for the A/L examination, irrespective of the subject stream they have chosen, have to sit for this paper. Additionally, this question would be discussed as a past question for many more years to come, greatly increasing its potential damage.

The Department of Examinations should take a more serious effort to assess the impact of questions prepared for examinations, in the minds of those who comprehend

the questions and those who do not. The unintended negative impacts on the psyche of children should be given consideration by the "professors" who allegedly set these questions. This applies to many other subject areas related to health such as use of illicit drugs, violence, unprotected sex, alcohol use, etc.

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