Janet Brigham

Why We Smoke and How We Stop

Foreword by C. Everett Koop, M.D.

DYING TO QUIT

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This book is dedicated to those who are dying to quit.

Foreword

Many of us in the public health arena have been fighting for decades to help create a worldwide society free of the disease and premature death associated with tobacco use. This effort has forced us to confront not only large, wealthy, deceitful industries, but also the nature of tobacco itself. Despite many public health efforts to promote a tobaccofree life, tobacco remains popular virtually everywhere in the world.

The public health struggle, however, is a mere shadow compared with the inner struggles of tobacco users themselves. They must deal not only with an addiction to nicotine, but with the other powerful and seductive effects of tobacco on their bodies and minds. Make no mistake: this is a struggle to the death. Smoking alone kills more than three million people worldwide every year, and is the direct cause of diseases that affect many millions more.

The numbers are so large that we can hardly envision them. Some 1.1 billion people worldwide use tobacco. This represents about 30 percent of the entire adult population of the world. Yet, as Dr. Janet Brigham writes in this book, we have become so accustomed to smoking

as part of our culture, we no longer see it. We are so used to the cigar displays in convenience stores, smokers standing outside doorways on break, and groups of youngsters smoking as they walk down a street, we no longer notice these things.

Yet they affect us all.

Nearly forty years ago, a scientist named Rachel Carson wrote a book called *Silent Spring* that served as a wake-up call about the hazards we humans were posing to our environment. It became the herald for a new movement that had the potential to preserve our world.

Now it is time for us to preserve our lives. *Dying to Quit* is written in the same spirit as *Silent Spring*, and it has a message as alarming but as necessary to hear. *Silent Spring* outlined findings from the science of environmentalism. This book is also a book of science—the science of tobacco's effects on those who use it. It is not a how-to book, not a book about politics. It is a book about how human beings' feelings, thoughts, and lives are affected by nicotine and the many other constituents of tobacco.

Smoking must become a topic we care about; it must become a topic we are aware of, and one we follow with interest and concern. Our worldwide society needs not only legislation and public health initiatives, but also knowledge about the way tobacco affects those who use it. We need to know about tobacco if we are to deal successfully with its influence on the life of each smoker—particularly if we are to help those who want to quit. With that knowledge will come the ability to minimize the disease and death associated with long-term use of tobacco. And this is the most propitious time in history to quit, because of pharmaceuticals and nicotine replacement therapy never before available.

The backbone of our public health efforts has been the dedicated labor of hundreds of scientists and other researchers who have painstakingly learned how tobacco works and why its hold is so powerful. As I write this, we have just become aware of current science-based statistics indicating that smoking and other uses of tobacco are increasing alarmingly quickly among our young people. For many, this will

not be surprising news, because we have seen this phenomenon on our streets and in our schools; but for most of us it is not welcome news.

The struggles of society are born anew with each person who comes into the world. Politics and science alone will not win the war that each tobacco user wages when he or she chooses to quit. That war must be fought—and can be won—only within the confines of the soul. This book goes far toward providing both the individual and the society with the weapons needed to succeed.

C. EVERETT KOOP, M.D., Sc.D. U.S. Surgeon General 1981–1989

On the Runway

Her seat back and tray table were in the upright position. Her seat belt was securely fastened. She couldn't leave her seat, couldn't even recline her seat. Couldn't smoke.

As the plane taxied for take-off, she slipped a pad of yellow legal paper from her handbag and pulled a flight magazine out of the seat pocket in front of her. Using the magazine for a writing surface, she recorded a date and time on the top page of the legal pad. It was late in the morning of a late-summer day; she was flying home for her mother's funeral.

The woman wrote words she probably never expected or wanted another human being to read. She alluded to raising children now grown, to being divorced and remarried. She wrote of sacrificing to build a career, without mentioning what career that was. She wrote too about her mother, about her own daughter, and about her squabbles with both. She scrutinized herself and found herself lacking.

More than anything else, she wrote about smoking, about how it was an illness, a priority, an isolating factor. She wrote that she had

used it to put distance between herself and those she loved. As the plane took off, she vowed to set things right by quitting smoking. She resolved to change her life, to feel more, to be kinder, more loving, more patient. She considered quitting before returning from the funeral, then added with ominous innocence that she still had a couple of packs of cigarettes she should finish first.

She apparently folded the notepaper and tucked it in the seat pocket along with the magazine. Later, as she left the plane, she left the pages behind. Maybe she just forgot them; maybe they had already served their purpose.

Not long afterward, an ex-smoker sat in that same seat on another flight. This second woman—my cousin—reached into the seat pocket to look for (no kidding) a barf bag to mail to a friend as a joke. She found, instead, the handwritten pages. She read them with easy comprehension; this was how she felt about smoking, too. Unable to return the pages to their anonymous author, she shared them with a couple of people close to her. She showed them to her husband, who confirmed that he too had felt the same way about smoking. She also sent them to me.

Thus these two women, my cousin, whom I know well, and the airline passenger I may never meet, unknowingly started this book eight years ago. I wish I could share those wrenching paragraphs with all who read this book, but they are not mine to share. They belong to the woman who wrote them. In their stead are the words of another smoker, an articulate and thoughtful young woman who once begged her grandfather to give up his pipe, and now hopes to give up her own cigarettes. The story of her life with and without tobacco forms the framework of this book.

To these three women I owe a sizable debt: Before I read the words from the discarded diary, I regarded smoking mostly in terms of nanograms per milliliter of nicotine metabolites in the bodily fluids of tobacco users. That's what I'd measured, in the quantification of tobacco exposure necessary for studying nicotine and tobacco. My training was in behavioral pharmacology, with occasional doses of brainwave research. I'd had little recent contact with the type of psychological re-

search in which one considers meanings and symbols. I'd had plenty of contact with smokers, but I confess to not always allowing myself to see the whole of their behavior.

Smoking is more than a behavior, and more than a meta-message about our world and our times. Our vulnerability to and widespread acceptance of this practice points us toward the need to explore the complexity of tobacco use, and to search for synthesis in the wealth of scientific research about nicotine and tobacco.

And a wealth it is. Scientists have studied how we puff, how we inhale, how we absorb, how we develop physical tolerance, how nicotine affects our moods, how we start smoking, and how we stop smoking. Little about tobacco use has gone unnoticed, although much remains to be explored. To future historians and scientists a few millennia down the pike, tobacco may appear to be the major bafflement of our time. Even if we survive pollutions, deforestations, wars, rap music, and Windows 95, will enough of us survive our self-made tobacco pandemic? Will future explorers wonder, as many today have questioned—

- How did we come to use tobacco with such frequency and regularity, when we knew that it would kill so many of us?
- How did our need overshadow our wisdom?
- Why didn't we stop?

Around the world, from Sweden to Australia, tobacco scientists spend their working days identifying patterns, contrasts, and logic in tobacco-related biology and behavior. The body of research they generate forms the groundwork for solutions to the worldwide tobacco problem. Although the information in this book is as current as today's news, I note with pleasure that every day this book's contents become increasingly dated. Daily, what researchers call "the field"—the state of the science, based on the most current publications and presentations—moves closer to understanding what keeps the woman on the airplane and her 1.1 billion worldwide counterparts using tobacco. Every day, we move closer to offering them better ways to quit.

Acknowledgments

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Additionally, I am thankful that Stephen Mautner of Joseph Henry Press was sufficiently enchanted with the prospectus for this book to encourage me to proceed.

And I can never offer enough warm words about my family and other loved ones for their continuing endurance and good humor.

Janet Brigham Menlo Park, California February 1998

DYING TO QUIT

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e sit alone in her office. She leans back, crosses her legs, and puts me—the interviewer—at ease. A cigarette would look natural in her hand.

"Now, here's an interesting story," she starts. "I go through lots of guilt about this. Neither of my parents smoked. The only person I knew who smoked was my grandfather, and he smoked a pipe.

"When I was—oh, God, in the first grade?—we found out at school how bad smoking is, and all this stuff that somehow you end up not caring about in your teen years. I remember getting down on my knees, crying and begging my grandfather to quit smoking. I told him that it was killing him. Begging him to quit smoking!

"And he did. And here I am smoking, how many years?" She doesn't quite stop to count.

"I don't smoke around him. He probably knows I smoke, but he doesn't say anything, and I don't tell him. I don't smoke before I see him, and I don't smoke until after I *finish* seeing him. Christmas is really difficult, because I can't wait to go have a smoke.

"Smoking was a bad thing, a horrible thing. I do it! I'm a horrible person!" She punctuates her self-condemnation by flinging up well-manicured hands and laughing. She is not a horrible person. She is merely a woman who smokes.