

**A**s sexual minorities continue to address the AIDS crisis and other serious health issues, another silent killer persistently has been stalking the community. Tobacco use kills 400,000 people in the United States every year, and gay men and lesbians smoke significantly more than the general population.

Although no hard data are available, several recent studies have found queers smoke more than their straight counterparts. In fact, research conducted by Ronald Stall of University of California at San Francisco revealed 41.5 percent of gay men in Portland and Tucson, Ariz., smoked compared to 22 percent of heterosexual men.

As for lesbians, 21 percent smoked compared to 16 percent of women overall, according to a 1991 study by University of California at Los Angeles. Because smoking is the single most important high-risk behavior associated with leading chronic diseases, these high rates should be of great concern to the sexual minorities community.

To generate awareness of this health threat, the Oregon Department of Human Services Tobacco Prevention and Education Program will be a leading sponsor of the ninth annual Oregonians Against Discrimination Luncheon on April 10 at the Hilton Hotel. The event raises money for Basic Rights Oregon, a non-profit organization dedicated to ending discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Stall suggests one reason for higher gay smoking rates is marketing. Like the alcohol industry, tobacco manufacturers understand how to target disenfranchised segments of the population. According to Stall, they conduct a

## SILENT KILLER

### Tobacco marketing targets sexual minorities community

by Mary Boehme

deliberate and well-funded campaign to seduce the gay community to take up and continue this deadly addiction.

And there is evidence to prove it. In the past few years, several thousand industry documents have been released as part of the massive, nationwide litigation against the tobacco companies. According to some of this paperwork, Philip Morris spent time researching gay male smokers in San Francisco during the mid-1990s. Joel P. Engardio of *San Francisco Weekly* said the study even went so far as to "out" the Marlboro Man, saying he is "the ultimate stud...orally fixated...and maybe a great one-nighter."

"In a society where male homosexuality is often interpreted to mean nonmasculinity, Marlboro is particularly appreciated as a cue to manhood," he reported. "Marlboro's success in this context depends wholly on the relevance of this cowboy image to the world (fantasy and real) of these gay consumers."

Stall is appalled by the use of the Marlboro Man to target gay men. "The ads are selling masculinity. It's a real setup for kids who feel marginalized and unsafe as gay adolescents. Here are these products marketed to prove your heterosexuality—'You can be the Marlboro Man!'"

But Philip Morris is not the only tobacco company allegedly targeting the sexual minorities

community. The American Lung Association also found in released documents that R.J. Reynolds created a campaign focused on queers in San Francisco during the 1990s. The company called the research "Project SCUM"—or "Subculture Urban Marketing."

R.J. Reynolds wanted to focus on gay smoking habits in the Castro district to improve the presence of its Red Kamel brand. Beyond the fact that this research was targeting them, the project's name was offensive to queers in San Francisco.

"This is a reminder that, gay or straight, black or white, we are all victims of the tobacco industry," said Bob Gordon, Coalition of Lavender Americans on Smoking and Health vice president. "We all suffer because of their greed."

And the tobacco industry is making its presence known in other ways as well. For years,



companies have been sponsoring sexual minority events and causes. According to a 1997 study by E.L. Brucker of the King County Health Department in Washington, Philip Morris donated several hundred thousand dollars to AIDS-related charities and other queer groups during the 1990s. Ironically, by accepting tobacco

support, gay community leaders, organizers, professionals and advocates are helping enable an industry that is the leading cause of the very health problems they are trying to solve.

"Obviously, the GLBT community is a population targeted by the tobacco industry," said Mel Kohn, Oregon Department of Human Services epidemiologist. "Reaching them with tobacco use prevention information is a top priority for the Tobacco Prevention and Education Program." □

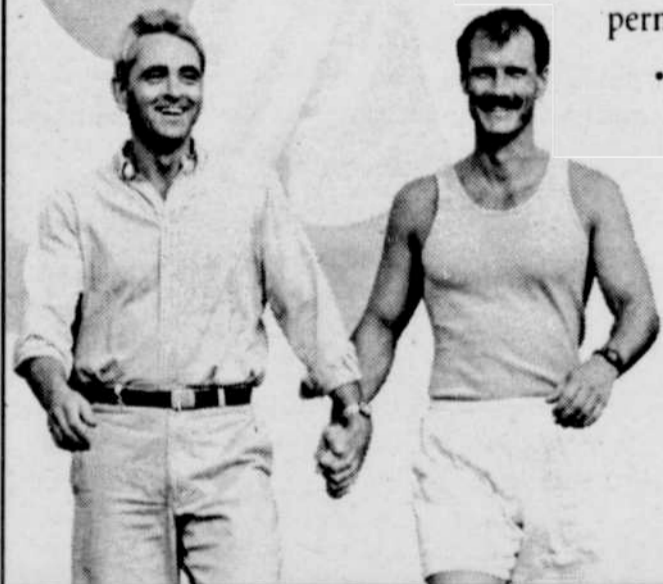
To quit the tobacco habit, call the toll-free OREGON QUIT LINE at 877-270-STOP or, in Spanish, 877-2-NO FUME.

MARY BOEHME works for the Department of Human Services Tobacco Prevention and Education Program.

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