

12 February 1954: Iain Macleod, Minister of Health: Written Answer

The Standing Advisory Committee on Cancer and Radiotherapy have had this matter under consideration for three years. As a result of preliminary investigations, a panel under the chairmanship of the Government Actuary was set up in 1953 to inquire and report. I have now been advised by the Committee in the following terms:

Having considered the report of the panel under the chairmanship of the Government Actuary on the statistical evidence of an association between smoking and cancer of the lung, and having reviewed the other evidence available to them, the Committee are of opinion: -

(1) It must be regarded as established that there is a relationship between smoking and cancer of the lung.

(2) Though there is a strong presumption that the relationship is causal, there is evidence that the relationship is not a simple one, since:-

(a) the evidence in support of the presence in tobacco smoke of a carcinogenic agent causing cancer of the lung is not yet certain;

(b) the statistical evidence indicates that it is unlikely that the increase in the incidence of cancer of the lung is due entirely to increases in smoking;

(c) the difference in incidence between urban and rural areas and between different towns, suggests that other factors may be operating, e.g., atmospheric pollution, occupational risks.

(3) Although no immediate dramatic fall in death-rates could be expected if smoking ceased, since the development of lung cancer may be the result of factors operating over many years, and although no reliable quantitative estimates can be made of the effect of smoking on the incidence of cancer of the lung, it is desirable that young people should be warned of the risks apparently attendant on excessive smoking. It would appear that the risk increases with the amount smoked, particularly of cigarettes.

I accept the Committee's view that the statistical evidence points to smoking as a factor in lung cancer, but I would draw attention to the fact that there is so far no firm evidence of the way in which smoking may cause lung cancer or of the extent to which it does so. Research into the causes of lung cancer has been pressed forward by the Government and by other agencies in view of the

increase in the incidence of this disease and we must look to the results of its vigorous pursuit to determine future action.

I should also tell the House that before these recommendations were considered by Her Majesty's Government the tobacco companies had offered to give £250,000 for research. They have, on my advice, agreed to offer this money to the Medical Research Council.

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