

An Editor's Invitation: Smoking

Category: Smoking

written by Paul Gross | August 1, 2021

Dear *Pulse* readers,

When I was twenty-three years old, I decided that I would try to become a smoker.

Wait. What?

It's true.

I was living in Minneapolis for the summer, trying to earn a living as a musician—good luck with that—and I somehow thought that smoking would add authenticity to my identity as an artist.

Besides, my favorite college professor had smoked.

So I bought a pack of cigarettes, and in the comfort of a threadbare furnished apartment I removed a magical white cylinder from the foil package and lit up.

My experiment in being cool lasted about five minutes. Between the burning in my lungs and the coughing, it seemed that my body was trying to tell me something.

I quit. Right then and there.

My short-lived smoking career did give me some appreciation for the effort required to become a smoker—and it amazes me that so many people make that commitment.

Nowadays, as a physician, every time I encounter a smoker I hope that, for the sake of their health, they'll quit. And I see it as my job to facilitate that process.

Because I believe that most smokers would *like* to quit, I don't see the point of haranguing them about the evils of smoking. Rather, I try to make friends with the part of them that wants to become healthier.

It takes patience. I'd say my success rate in the short term is poor, but in the long term it's pretty good, although I still have a number of smokers in my practice.

Here's one of my successes:

Many years ago a gruff old gentleman made his first visit to my office. He told me that he smoked, and after asking him a few questions about this habit (he'd been smoking forever), I probably said something like this, as empathetically as I could: "Well, the single best thing you could do for your

health would be to stop smoking.”

He was tough as nails, and I was sure that my words were wasted.

Nearly a year later, he returned for a second visit. To my astonishment, he’d stopped smoking.

“I feel better!” he said. “I can walk my dog again. I used to get too winded.”

I was flabbergasted.

And because life is never as simple or perfect as we would like, there’s more to this story. Months later he returned again, now losing weight and suffering from abdominal pain.

He had pancreatic cancer—very possibly brought on by smoking. He died not long afterwards.

I think of him when I tell my patients about the benefits of quitting—“You’ll breathe better, you’ll have more strength and energy.”

And I think of him when I worry about the impact of smoking on my patients who haven’t quit—yet.

What about you? What’s been your relationship to smoking—your own, or by patients and people you care about?

August’s *More Voices* theme is [Smoking](#). Send us your lived experience. And while you’re at it, take a look at last month’s theme, [Exercise](#).

For more details, visit [More Voices FAQs](#)—or go directly to the [More Voices Submission Form](#). Remember, your healthcare-related story should be 40-400 words. And no poetry, please.

I hope you’re able to enjoy this summer. Please take good care, and encourage those you love to get vaccinated.

With warm regards,

Paul Gross
Editor