

# *State Official Examines Priorities*

By Larry J. Gordon, Deputy Secretary for Health and Environment,

State of New Mexico

What would our federal, state, and local governing bodies do if they knew that a plant was being cultivated from which products were derived that caused illness and death and required inordinate sums of governmental and private funds to be spent in an attempt to prevent morbidity and mortality resulting from their use?

Of course we all know the answer. They would create new preventive programs, fund new treatment facilities, enact rigid laws to prevent the plant's distribution and use, and exact the necessary revenue to support these efforts --- as long as the plant was the poppy and was the agricultural commodity of a foreign country.

But if it was tobacco and was grown, processed, and distributed within the United States, what would our federal, state, and local governing bodies do? Again, we all know the answer. They would take such extreme steps as requiring small warning labels, feebly controlling advertising, and providing a pittance for a national smoking prevention effort, while being extremely careful not to inhibit the growth or distribution of the product or otherwise adversely affect the tobacco growing industry. They would also insure that our citizens were required to share evenly in providing taxes and insurance costs to treat those who chose to use tobacco regardless of feeble warnings and token programs. They would heed the cries of those who proclaim smoking as an inalienable personal liberty despite the fact that

every citizen suffers the consequences and pays the costs. They would not consider smoking an environmental problem similar to other environmental pollutants and insults.

When a carcinogen or other harmful pollutant emanates from an industry, regulatory action is taken through EPA, FDA, OSHA, etc. But, while it is known that tobacco is harmful, the U.S. government continues to provide significantly greater funding through the Department of Agriculture to protect and promote the tobacco industry than it does to prevent smoking or protect non-smokers from this carcinogen.

Those interested in environmental health and other disease prevention programs have an important stake in supporting President Carter's hospital cost containment proposal and the cost containment efforts of agencies recently created by the United States Congress. While we continue to pour increasing billions into the sickness treatment system, this does little to improve the health

status of our citizens. The escalating costs of sickness treatment are so great that even minimal funding is not available for prevention, the only program that will significantly improve the nation's health status. Prevention of smoking is one of the known and basic efforts which would effectively increase the life span of our citizens, increase health status, enhance environmental quality, decrease sickness treatment costs, decrease insurance costs, improve employee productivity, and upgrade the enjoyment of living.

The factor contributing most to the rise in both the crude and age - adjusted cancer death rates is lung cancer, which alone kills more than 80,000 Americans a year. The steady increase in lung cancer deaths, mainly in men, is sufficient to raise the cancer death rates for the entire population. It is estimated that cigarette smoking in this country is directly responsible for about one-third of all cancers. Tobacco smoking is an etiological factor for cancers of the lip, tongue, mouth, larynx,

**esophagus, lung, stomach, bladder,  
and pancreas.**

**As individuals, we can set a non-  
smoking example for our families and  
other citizens and continue to demand  
the necessary societal efforts to  
remedy this scourge.**

**We must push for societal actions  
necessary to remedy the smoking  
epidemic. It won't be easy, quick, or  
non-controversial, but smoking is an  
identified and serious environmental  
health factor. It really is a matter of  
life and breath!**

**NEW MEXICO TUMOR REGISTRY NEWSLETTER**

**July 1978, Vol. 7, No. 2**