

# TAR WARS HAS COME A LONG WAY IN 20 YEARS

## Growing army of young people learns tactics of lethal foe

Tar Wars, a tobacco-use prevention program that started in Colorado, celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2008.

Since 1988, a local notion has evolved into a campaign that involves thousands of health care professionals and other volunteers reaching out to millions of fifth-graders in the U.S. and 16 other countries.

The message, which is delivered in hour-long classroom presentations, was originally considered radical but is now mainstream. It has always been the same: Tar Wars shows how the tobacco industry uses advertising to manipulate potential users by making smoking appear sexy, glamorous and cool. The image-based program emphasizes short-term consequences to show why smoking actually is NOT sexy, glamorous and cool. Tar Wars is most effective when used in conjunction with other anti-smoking messages.

Jeffrey J. Cain, M.D., recalls how the innovative, interactive program began. He was a second-year resident at Mercy Family Medicine Residency at Mercy Hospital when his residency director, Dr. Rick Streiffer, suggested that he attend the AAFP's National Conference for Family Practice Residents. Dr. Streiffer also told Dr. Cain to be sure to attend the workshops from the group Doctors Ought to Care, called DOC. Their speaker, Dr. Rick Richards, spoke forcefully and passionately about how the tobacco industry was inten-

tionally targeting kids with tobacco advertising.

The talk inspired the young resident. He returned to his residency to tell the director, "We need to do something about this!" Dr. Streiffer agreed that the issue was an important one, responding, "Yes, YOU need to do something about it!"

So, Dr. Cain joined the board of the Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Colorado (CTFC) and supported a range of worthwhile tobacco-free activities. Along with the rest of the group, he worked on legislation that would make it more difficult for young people to purchase cigarettes. That helped on the supply side. But board members asked themselves if there might be ways to affect the demand side of the tobacco market.

### MESSAGES THAT MAKE SENSE TO FIFTH-GRADERS

Dr. Cain remembers that most of the anti-smoking messages at the time were along the lines of telling people not to smoke or they would get cancer or even possibly die later in life. While the message is rational and horrendous, Dr. Cain said it's not very effective with young people, those who are at the age when



they are just forming their views about tobacco use and possibly starting to smoke. Data shows that kids start smoking around the ages of 12 to 14 years, an age when they are much more concerned with image and what happens in their immediate lives.

At the time, Dr. Cain was working closely on the CTFC with Glenna Pember, who was a member of the coalition and a health educator with the Hall of Life at the Denver Museum of Natural History. Pember, who has gone on to become a physician's assistant working for New West Physicians in Arvada, had a proven track record in health education and a platform for reaching young

people. Dr. Cain and Pember wanted to use the tobacco industry's own tactics against them to help young people think about not smoking. The approach was considered radical at the time, Dr. Cain



said, explaining, "We were calling direct attention to the tobacco industry and its promotional tactics."

Together, Pember and Dr. Cain col-

*continued on page 20*



continued from page 18

laborated to create a lesson that combined theories from the Hall of Life and DOC, emphasizing the short-term consequences of tobacco use that made sense to fifth-graders - like the stinkiness of cigarettes and how the cost of smoking could be explained in video games per month. Without a budget for printing, they snuck into the hospital late at night to photocopy the first curriculum. Reaching out to the residency for support, they used residents and faculty to present the program in school classrooms.

In the first year, Family Medicine residents, school nurses and teachers delivered the curriculum to 7,000 Denver fifth-graders. Dr. Cain said everyone, including teachers and students, liked it. In its second year, with support from the CAFP and St. Anthony Health Corporation, the program expanded from Denver to other parts of Colorado.

As time went on, the program went forward. Local businesses and doctors provided financial support. George Lucas gave his permission to use the Tar Wars name, though use of Star Wars music and characters was specifically prohibited.

In 1990, Tar Wars received two remarkable awards. Dr. Cain and Pember were awarded a Special Recognition Medal for Tobacco Control from the World Health Organization (WHO), presented by the U.S. Surgeon General in Washington, D.C. Additionally, Tar Wars received an award as an Outstanding Community Health Promotion Program from the United States Secretary of Health.

## STATE PROGRAM EXPANDS TO REGION, THEN NATION

In 1991, Tar Wars spread to the Rocky Mountain region. By then, Dr. Cain was in private practice and one of his contacts was a representative for Lederle Pharmaceuticals, which had developed nicotine gum. The company agreed to provide financial support for a regional conference, attended by representatives from eight states.

In 1992, the Journal of Family Practice published an article about Tar Wars, which “got a lot of people excited,” Dr. Cain recalls. Among those people were Larry Smith, M.D., a Family Physician in Maine, and his wife Janie Smith, RN, MS.

“We found the program to be exciting and successful,” Dr. Smith recalls.

“A groundswell of support developed in Maine.”

Among those in Maine who were interested was the Smiths’ friend Steve Lufken, who worked for Marion Merrell Dow, a pharmaceutical company. Lufken said he thought the program should be available nationally.

So the five of them – Dr. and Mrs. Smith, Dr. Cain, Pember, and Lufken – retreated to the Smiths’ cabin in the Maine woods, where they ate local lobster and developed vision and mission statements for a national Tar Wars. And, in the fall of 1993, a national training conference was scheduled for Denver.

“We invited everybody to our camp in Maine and put out some audacious ideas, and we were able to accomplish most of them,” Dr. Smith recalls.



Dr. Cain accepts 1990 World Health Organization award for Tar Wars.

A law firm worked at no charge to trademark the name and make Tar Wars a non-profit organization. A printer who is a friend of Dr. Cain designed the logo almost by accident when he wrote, “Tar Wars” with his left hand in crayon. Mrs. Smith developed a state organizers’ tool kit so people could know just what to do and how to do it. “We didn’t want Tar Wars to be just us,” Dr. Cain said. “We wanted people running it in each state to see it as their own program. True success is not accomplished by what you do with your own hands; it’s what lives on in the work and lives of others.”

Mrs. Smith became the first national program chairman, Dr. Cain the national president, and high-level speakers agreed to make presentations at the conference. The toll-free 1-800-TAR-WARS number rang into the Smiths’ kitchen. For their first national conference, invitations were sent to every state health department and each



Raquel with Joe Chemo (Shane) at Tar Wars Award Ceremony

chapter of the American Academy of Family Physicians.

Dr. Cain recalls that the Tar Wars leaders estimated that the cost of the conference would be \$50,000. Without a sponsor, Dr. and Mrs. Smith, Dr. Cain and Lufken initially put the associated costs on their personal credit cards and hoped to find a national sponsor prior to the conference. Luckily, Lufken’s employer, Marion Merrell Dow, came through with only weeks to spare.

In all for their first national conference, 32 states sent representatives to the conference. “It was enthusiastic, it was fun, it was exciting,” recalls Dr. Cain.

Tar Wars leaders understood their natural link with Family Physicians and sought support from the American Academy of Family Physicians. Mark Costley, M.D., from Monett, Mo., was one of the initial Tar Wars leaders in his state and helped develop an effective approach to the national organization. He recalls, “We thought it was a good marriage inside the state academy.” He was also on an AAFP commission that could support Tar Wars. “There was no magic. It was just two great organizations getting together and making things happen,” he said.

Tar Wars had its first display booth at an AAFP conference in 1993. Drs. Smith, Cain, and Mrs. Smith initially wore blue blazers, making them look like “cheap drug reps,” Dr. Cain recalls. They were far better received after they changed their attire to Tar Wars T-shirts and khakis.

It was also in 1993 that Dr. Cain began

to deliver training at the STFF/AAFP annual Conference on Patient Education. His presentation, "Tar Wars: Helping Kids Say No to Camel Joe," was rated the number one presentation at the 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997 and 1998 conferences.

Also in 1993, the AAFP endorsed Tar Wars, causing the program's grateful advocates to scratch their heads and wonder just what that meant. They found that mainly the endorsement gave them an entrée for bringing the Tar Wars campaign to state chapters.

A huge boost for Tar Wars came in 1996 when Pat Harr, M.D., FAAFP, was elected president of the AAFP. Harr, who also served as the academy's representative to the American Medical Association concerning the tobacco settlement, made Tar Wars part of his campaign for president. And after he was elected, he sent letters to all members of the AAFP, challenging each of them to give one hour of their time to the program to make a difference for youth.

"Jeff Cain developed Tar Wars and essentially ran it out of his office," Dr. Harr recalls. "I wanted to take it nationally because I thought it was a great program for Family Physicians." He said that thousands of members took up his challenge and presented the program in the communities, making it the AAFP activity with the

largest member participation outside of continuing medical education.

"Jeff Cain was the mastermind of Tar Wars, and it was through his graciousness that we were able to take it to the national level," Dr. Harr said. "And it took off beyond my expectations and his too."

Just as when Tar Wars had grown from a local to a state program and from a regional program to national one, it again experienced exponential growth. "Enthusiastic doctors in state chapters were doing the right thing for kids," Dr. Cain recalls. In 1995, Dr. Cain was awarded the AAFP Public Health Award for his work on Tar Wars.

### AAFP TAKES OVER OPERATION IN 1997

By 1996, Tar Wars had reached one million students, and a proposal was made for the AAFP to take over Tar Wars as their sole licensee. The Tar Wars leaders made a pitch to the organization, turned down the academy's original offer of one year of support, made a counter offer for a multi-year agreement, and held their breaths. The AAFP accepted the counter offer and ended up with a four-year agreement starting in 1997. Sara McMullin, who had been the South Carolina state coordinator, moved to



Kansas City to serve as the academy's new national program manager.

An important component of the Tar Wars lesson plan is a poster contest, which illustrates how students have integrated the Tar Wars lesson. Students at each school where the program is presented create posters, using the tobacco industry's own weapons against it. The posters are required to be positive, showing the positive effects of not using tobacco rather than dwelling on the negative effects of smoking.

School poster contest winners are sent to their state poster contest, and state winners compete in a national event. Originally, the contest had rotated among states active in

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## From a Presenter's Perspective

### *Tar Wars is a fun and easy way to deliver a vital message*

"Family Doctors do Tar Wars the first time because they want to make a difference in the lives of kids," says Jeffrey J. Cain, M.D., Tar Wars co-founder and current medical director. "They do it a second year because it's fun."

He describes the program as being "drop-dead user-friendly," explaining that the materials, which are available in Spanish as well as English, enable people with no background or previous knowledge about tobacco prevention to easily make interactive presentations, which incorporate a high level of student participation.

The American Academy of Family Physicians, owner and operator of the program, provides a 22-page guide illustrated with pictures of student-produced posters. The first page states, "The lesson plan consists of a pre-activity exercise, a one-hour classroom presentation, and a follow-up poster contest. Minimal preparation is required, and the program is free to schools." More specifically, the guide recommends 30 to 45 minutes to read through the guide before the 45-minute to one-hour presentation, usually in fifth-grade classrooms.

The guide lists the four goals of the program, which are:

- "To increase (students') knowledge of the short-term effects

and image-based consequences of tobacco use,

- Illustrate the costs of using tobacco and ways they could better spend their money,
- Help them identify reasons why people use tobacco, and
- Prompt them to think critically about tobacco advertising and how the tobacco industry markets their products to youth."

It goes into greater detail on the six activities, which are:

- Identification of short-term effects of tobacco use,
- Straw/breathing exercise to show how smoking affects breathing,
- Discussion of financial implication of tobacco use,
- Discussion of reasons people use tobacco,
- Exploration of tobacco and advertising, and
- The poster contest, which is usually led by the teacher at some point after the Tar Wars presentation.

Throughout the guide, readers are directed to [www.tarwars.org](http://www.tarwars.org), a site with a variety of additional information, including a presenter training slideshow and a series of visual, hands-on, science based activities that can be used in follow-up.

# BUT, DOES IT WORK?

## Studies provide evidence of Tar Wars' effectiveness

A quick look at the presenter's guide shows that the Tar Wars tobacco-use prevention program is innovative, interactive and fun. But does it work? Both quantitative and qualitative research provides evidence that it does.

One study was conducted during the 1998-1999 school year in the state of New York. A peer-reviewed report on the study by multiple authors concluded, "The findings suggest that inexpensive, one-time interventions for tobacco-use prevention can be of value. Changes in attitudes and knowledge conducive to the goal of tobacco-use prevention can be achieved for short-term retention, and some relevant knowledge items can be retained for several months."

Another study used both quantitative and qualitative measures to evaluate the effectiveness

of the Tar Wars program in Colorado during the 2001-2002 school year. The primary quantitative measure was a comparison of tests taken by students before and after a Tar Wars presentation. A peer-reviewed report on the study concluded, "The Tar Wars lesson plan is effective in increasing students' understanding about the short-term consequences of tobacco use, cost of tobacco use, truth of tobacco advertising, and peer norms. It can be considered an effective lesson plan as part of a comprehensive school-based strategy."

The report continues, "Tar Wars meets CDC guidelines as one component of effective comprehensive youth prevention." Looking into those guidelines, it is clear that the program corresponds closely to many criteria. CDC guidelines call for "instruction about the short-term and long-term negative physiologic and social consequences of tobacco use, social influences on tobacco use, peer norms regarding tobacco use, and refusal skills." The guidelines also state, "Programs that only discuss tobacco's harmful effects or attempt to instill fear do not prevent

tobacco use."

Like the New York study, the Colorado one included interviews with those involved in the program. One student commented, "I was way off. I thought more adults than ninth-graders smoke, and I thought no fifth-graders smoke." Another observed, "You could tell she (the doctor) knew what she was talking about. ... She was speaking from experience."

A teacher commented, "The smell of it and the cost of it -- that appalled them. One of my little kids went home and told his mother that she is quit smoking, that they'd have enough money to buy good food."

A presenter stated, "We've heard it all; we've done the DARE program; we know all there is to know about smoking; you're not telling us anything new' (the students say). And it wasn't until they actually heard the beginning of the presentation that they were really willing to sit and listen, because they realized, 'Oh, this is a little different from what we've heard before.'"

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Tar Wars, but after the AAFP took over the program, the national contest was moved to Washington, D.C. As part of the event, all state winners now schedule meetings with their individual Congressional delegations so they can talk to lawmakers about the importance of tobacco prevention. In addition, a national AAFP leadership conference for state Tar Wars coordinators is held in conjunction with the contest. All state winners receive a prize packet, and the first-place winner is awarded a trip to Disney World.

Dr. Cain recalls the 1997 cab ride with Dr. Smith when they went together to Capitol Hill, site of the first AAFP national poster contest. Reflecting on the progress from the start of the program when they had first dreamed of a national Tar Wars, they were amazed, "Wow, we really did this," they said.

## AAFP TAKES ON FULL OWNERSHIP IN 2000

In 2000, the relationship between Tar Wars and the AAFP was formalized even further when the program was formally sold to the organization for \$1. Dr. Cain never cashed the check, which still sits framed on his wall.

A national advisory committee was formed with representation from collaborative partners, including the National Association of School Nurses and the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. Some of the original leaders, including Dr. Cain, have also served continuously on the committee. In addition to the AAFP Foundation, national sponsors have included Schering Pharmaceutical Company.

In 2002, in the face of a budget crisis, the AAFP considered reducing or dropping Tar Wars. One idea that was on the table was even sending the program back to its founders. But, as Dr. Harr noted, Tar Wars had become the AAFP program with the



greatest participation of its members. Out of a membership of approximately 90,000, about 15,000 physicians and all of the state chapters were participating in Tar Wars. The Congress of Delegates argued that the program was a valuable service to kids, to academy members, and to state chapters. Instead of eliminating or limiting the program, the congress voted unanimously to retain the

program and gave themselves a standing ovation for formalizing that commitment.

Again in 2007, the Congress of Delegates reaffirmed their support of Tar Wars and ongoing academy sponsorship with a resolution. "People get fired up about this," Dr. Cain said. He points out that by now other educational programs aimed at youth tobacco-use prevention utilize messages similar to those conveyed in Tar Wars. Instead of using a disease-based, lecturing tone, effective youth tobacco-use prevention messages talk about the tobacco industry's manipulation of image and how smoking directly impacts young people's lives. In that sense, the program has gone from radical to mainstream.

Dr. Smith said, "Once Tar Wars came into the AAFP, Janie and I moved away from involvement. It was in good hands. We took a smaller local role, giving local talks some of the time, but we no longer oversaw it as we once did."

Dr. Cain compares the 20-year-old project to a child who has gone off to college. As medical director, he still takes a strong interest in its well-being and offers advice from time to time. He realizes Tar Wars has matured and takes pride in the success the program continues to enjoy under the leadership of the AAFP. His hope is that the "AAFP and Tar Wars will continue to collaborate until together we can achieve our goal of a nation of tobacco-free youth."