

The ALCALDE

A large tree is being moved by a crane. The tree is suspended by a large metal ring and cables. In the background, the University of Texas clock tower is visible. The scene is set in an urban area with other trees and buildings.

JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2006

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Fuming Mad

As CEO of the American Heart Association, M. Cass Wheeler has set his sights on big tobacco
★ by John Egan

A YEAR AFTER M. CASS WHEELER earned his bachelor's degree in business from UT in 1963, the U.S. surgeon general issued a groundbreaking report on the health hazards of cigarette smoking. The report blamed smoking for a 70 percent jump in the death rate of smokers vs. non-smokers. By the time the report was released in 1964, however, Wheeler was a dedicated smoker. He picked up the habit as a teenager in Texas.

Wheeler did quit smoking at age 26, but soon returned to lighting up — he sometimes smoked a pack a day — and was an on-again, off-again smoker until giving it up cold turkey in the late 1970s. As an adult smoker, Wheeler felt like he was “living in the valley of the damned. Every morning that I got up when I was smoking, I was saying, ‘Oh, my God, I want to quit so badly.’ And then once I quit, every morning I would wake up and say, ‘Oh, my gosh, I want a cigarette so badly.’”

Now, the desire for cigarettes is gone. As an ex-smoker and as CEO of the Dallas-based American Heart Association since 1997, Wheeler is one of the harshest critics of the tobacco industry. Take for instance the 1994 congressional testimony of the seven CEOs of big tobacco. Under oath, each executive declared that “nicotine is not addictive.” Wheeler, who says nicotine (the active ingredient in tobacco) is more addictive than heroin, bristles when recalling the CEOs’ appearance on Capitol Hill.

“Every one of them perjured themselves, and every one of them should be prosecuted for that,” Wheeler says adamantly. “You do not stand up and take an oath before Congress and lie.”

Wheeler doesn’t fear standing up to big tobacco, which he holds responsible for the more than 400,000 American deaths each year linked to cigarette smoking. Citing the fact that 88 percent of the roughly 45 to 50 million American smokers began lighting up as teens, Wheeler proclaims that those smokers “are a product of this country selling

out to the tobacco industry. We essentially have an unregulated product; orange juice has more regulations than tobacco. Congress has not granted the Food and Drug Administration the power to regulate the industry and, therefore, de facto we have allowed the tobacco industry to prey on and exploit our children.”

Wheeler says it outrages him when he spots a parent smoking around a youngster. “Who is protecting the rights of that child?” he asks. According to the U.S. surgeon general, exposure to secondhand smoke causes an estimated 46,000 coronary heart disease deaths each year and increases a nonsmoker’s risk for heart disease by as much as 30 percent.

Aside from secondhand smoke being inhaled by children, Wheeler worries about childhood obesity. About 15 percent of American children and adolescents are overweight. To combat childhood obesity, the American Heart Association has teamed up with various organizations to, for instance, boost the

AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION

amount of healthy snacks and beverages available in schools. Wheeler says food manufacturers and others have been responsive to the obesity-fighting efforts. That's in contrast to the association's relationship with big tobacco. "When you are dealing with the tobacco industry, which has a track record of deception and lying and manipulation, we will not sit down at the table with them," Wheeler says.

In his decade at the head table of the American Heart Association, Wheeler has witnessed several landmarks. (He joined the nonprofit in 1973 after stints at the American Cancer Society and two Wall Street brokerage firms.) During his tenure as CEO, the American Heart Association has launched an offshoot, the American Stroke Association, to battle the nation's third-biggest killer; introduced a program at U.S. hospitals aimed at improving the care and outcomes for heart and stroke patients; and established a goal of reducing coronary heart disease, stroke, and their risks by 25 percent by 2010.

The American Heart Association is on its way to reaching that goal, adopted in 1998. Wheeler rattles off some promising statistics: a more than 23.1 percent decline in deaths attributed to coronary heart disease, a more than 19 percent drop in stroke deaths, and a 13 percent decrease in smoking. "We've made remarkable progress," he says.

Personally, Wheeler has made his own progress. He has two adult children from a previous marriage and two young children from his current union with wife DeLisa. And he's now a grandfather. As many grandfathers do, Wheeler has altered his exercise routine to protect his joints, trading in cycling and running for brisk morning walks.

Of course, the leader of the American Heart Association is still running toward that 25 percent goal. Wheeler says the nonprofit is willing to take "prudent risks" to achieve its mission.

"It's an organization that improves the quality of life and actually saves lives," he says. "It's a very dynamic organization. Every year is different from the preceding year."

John Egan is a freelance writer in Austin.

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