

April 9, 1996

American Academy of Family Physicians
Robert Graham, MD, Executive Vice President
8880 Ward Parkway
Kansas City, MO 64114

Dear Dr. Graham:

The American Society of Internal Medicine (ASIM) believes it is essential that health advocacy organizations do their part to stem the tide of tobacco use and the disease and premature death that it brings to hundreds of thousands of our citizens every year. It is astounding that, in spite of all that is known about the harmful effects of tobacco use, this industry, through its lobbying and political contributions to legislators at all levels of government, has been able to keep its products almost entirely unregulated.

The society calls upon the American Academy of Family Physicians to require that the lobbyists it employs are not also engaged in advocacy on behalf of tobacco interests. The 1995 ASIM House of Delegates adopted a resolution that asks all organizations promoting public health to take such steps. Those, at all levels of government, who advocate on behalf of organizations seeking to promote the health of the American people should not simultaneously speak for an industry responsible for the largest cause of preventable death and disability in America.

The challenge tobacco use in our society poses to the health promotion community is a formidable one, particularly as regards our nation's most precious resource, its youth. In spite of all that is now known about the hazards of tobacco, use among our young people is on the rise. Between 1991 and 1994, there was a 30 percent increase in eighth-graders who said they had smoked in the past month. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) proposal to curtail the use of tobacco by children and teens is an encouraging step, one that is enthusiastically supported by the health advocacy community. However, the tobacco industry is aggressively advocating that Congress bar the FDA from finalizing this long overdue regulation. It is wholly inappropriate that some individuals who represent health promotion organizations are the very ones working to persuade the Congress to block the FDA from acting.

Acting to assure that our legislative advocates are not engaged in such a blatant conflict of interest will not, in and of itself, stop the tobacco industry from using its considerable resources to manipulate local, state and federal politics nationwide. However, ASIM believes this to be an important step, one which is well within the interest and ability of all groups concerned with the public health to accomplish.

We thank you in advance for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

Alan Nelson, MD
Executive Vice President