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Title: Government campaigns against teenage smoking have all failed
dismally. A charity thinks it has the answer.

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Talk to any group of teenagers about smoking, and they have an answer for everything. "I don't want to live until I'm 40," they say, "I'd rather enjoy my life now." Another stock answer is: "My granddad smoked for 40 years and lived to a ripe old age." Small wonder the Health Education Authority's multi-million pound antismoking campaign, aimed specifically at teenagers, has been a dismal failure: the number of 15-year-olds who smoke is still around 27 per cent.

The Government has run a whole host of campaigns to persuade the nation's youth to stop. In the Seventies there was the "More money-more fun if you don't smoke" message. In the Eighties, Superman's sworn enemy was the evil Nick O'Teen, Hijacker of Health. This decade has already seen the "Smoking-who needs it?" campaign but the number of regular teenage smokers has remained stubbornly static since 1982.

Now Quit, the only UK charity offering practical help to people who want to stop smoking, has launched the "Slave No More" pack which it hopes gives a different spin on the old health message. The pack contains 12 brightly designed cards which use powerful images and provide hard-hitting facts about smoking. "Teenagers are fed up with being patronized," says Peter McCabe, Quit's chief executive. "It's no good telling them that if they smoke they'll be dead at 40 because at that age they can't see past 30. Beyond that, the zimmer frame beckons."

Quit hopes the pack will encourage debate and get young people thinking about the issues around smoking. "One of the main messages is that if you smoke you're being conned by the tobacco industry, which is only interested in profit. Teenagers are intensely suspicious of being manipulated," Peter McCabe explains.

The zany cards, which contain anarchic messages like "Who gives a toss if you smoke?" and "Smoking 20 fags a day has got to be worth losing a limb for-hasn't it?" may make teenagers sit up. But will they make them give up?

"I think dire warnings about bad breath, smelly hair, infertility and the inability to score with the opposite sex will be far more effective than the 'I told you so' approach which teenagers have tended to ignore in the past," says McCabe. "We are well aware that information and advice is not enough. That's why each card has the Quitline number so they can contact us in confidence and get support."

One of the campaign's major advantages is the implication that teenagers can beat the system if they stop. There is nothing a teenager hates more than being taken for a sucker. The message on one card reads: "No one really cares if you give up smoking or not. One good reason is that you've been turned into a mug. You're addicted to nicotine, a totally useless drug, and it's costing you dear. Quitting is about doing something positive-proving you are a master of your own destiny."

Another card appeals to teenagers' vanity. "Smoking knackers your boat race" it says. Turn over the card and you can read about how smoking causes premature wrinkles: "If you want to end up looking like a cross between a prune and a cat's bottom, just keep on sucking."

Quit counselors like Honor Somerset would like to see schools play a more active role in helping children quit. "We have callers as young as 10 phoning in for help," she says. "Though some schools do run stop-smoking programs, most sweep the problem under the carpet so youngsters don't know where to turn for support."

Quit would like the packs to be made available in schools. "Many children get into smoking as part of a rebellion against the system," says Honor Somerset. "Then they find they are hooked, and they panic. These kids don't want the information pack sent to their homes in case their parents find out. School is the obvious place to have the packs lying around."

Last year Seth turned 19 and was desperate to kick the habit. "Not only was I skint but I got out of breath just climbing the stairs," he says. He read about the Slave No More campaign in his local paper and is now completely sold on it. "It's been brilliant. It's the first thing I've seen that's really aimed at teenagers. I found all the stuff on the back of the cards telling you what's happening to your body at each stage of giving up was really helpful. Everyone can get something out of it," he says.

Quit has its work cut out. Staff know that once teen-agers start smoking, it is really difficult for them to stop. It only takes a few fags to turn

a 'behind-the-bike-shed' smoker into the hardened nicotine addict of the future. Gay Sutherland, a clinical psychologist at the Maudsley Smokers' Clinic in London, explains that it is the addiction to nicotine that is so hard to beat. "We now know that if you have smoked just three or four cigarettes in your youth, you have a 94 per cent chance of becoming a long-term smoker," she says.

"I wish I'd had more willpower when I was at school," says Seth, "but the long-term effects of smoking seemed so far away it just wasn't a problem." Another reformed smoker, Simone Carter, agrees. She wishes the campaign had been around when she was younger. "I was only 12 when I had my first cigarette. I'd just started secondary school and I wanted to look cool. I only did it because a lot of my older friends smoked. "

At first, Simone pretended she knew how to smoke. "It really made me cough," she says, "but I soon got used to it. Then my friends started buying me cigarettes and I felt I had to keep up the pretense. When I was 14, I started buying my own cigarettes-everyone I know was doing it- and by the time I left school I was buying 20 a day. Soon I realized I was totally hooked." It was when Simone was half-heartedly trying to give up that her uncle died of lung cancer. He wasn't a big man when he was well, she recalls, but when he got ill he went down to six stone. Even when he knew he was going to die, Simone's uncle used to beg her for a cigarette. Witnessing this, she was upset to think that she could be in the same situation herself in 20 years' time.

"When you're a teenager you've heard it all," she says, "and you don't believe people who say it can be as bad for you as all that. It really brings it home when you lose someone in your family. You never want to smoke again."

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