

Young and Invincible

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I am writing this column for the young and invincible, and dedicating it to my Dad, Paul Packham.

Like many men of his generation, Dad took his first puff of a cigarette in grade school, began smoking regularly as a teenager, and was completely hooked on tobacco by the time he returned from a tour of duty in Korea. Like the teenagers of today, my Dad was once young and invincible.

Last week, Dad passed away at the age of 78 from respiratory failure associated with emphysema.

Dad's death certificate will list "chronic obstructive pulmonary disease" as the cause of death, but the real cause of his death, of course, was a lifelong addiction to tobacco and cigarette smoking.

It is an understatement to say that cigarette smoking was a ubiquitous feature of growing up in working class Oklahoma City in the 1940s and 1950s. Cigarettes were cheap and easy, and the majority of men, including healthy young men like Dad, smoked.

Dad's generation preceded the Surgeon General's warnings and wasn't privy to the wealth of research on the consequences of smoking (or second-hand smoke or smokeless tobacco for that matter). Yet like the young and invincible of today, Dad's addiction was possible, in part, because he had no idea what a lifetime of cigarette smoking had in store for him, particularly in his final years.

Dad was a stubborn, but not ignorant, man. In his 50s, he grudgingly came to acknowledge the toll cigarette smoking was taking on his health just as he came to reckon with a health damaging daily habit of four or five beers.

On New Year's Day 1990, he decided to give up alcohol and for the remaining 20 years of his life never took another drink. Kicking cigarettes, however, was another matter.

Despite repeated attempts to quit over the past couple of decades and failing health, Dad was unable to stop smoking up to the day, literally, he was hospitalized with respiratory failure.

I chafe at the trite notion that, in the end, "we all die of something." Indeed, if I've learned anything in the final two weeks I spent with Dad, it's that you don't want to die of emphysema.

Emphysema is an irreversible, degenerative condition of the lungs, which is to say, one can slow but not stop its deadly progression, and is almost exclusively caused by cigarette smoking.

Those suffering from emphysema do not get enough oxygen and cannot expel carbon dioxide, and are consequently always short of breath. Slowly and insidiously, the condition only worsens.

Some of my fondest memories of Dad were playing baseball and football with him well past his 50th birthday. In the past couple years, shortness of breath kept this once vital and energetic man from doing things as simple as tying his shoes or taking a shower.

Worse, Dad's final sixteen days on earth were spent tied to a respirator gasping for breath, sedated and manacled to his hospital bed, unaware that death was near.

This has easily been the most difficult column I've ever written – one interrupted by many tears and many misgivings about sharing Dad's story while his loss remains heavy for my Mom and family.

I am someone who has had the good fortune, if it can be called that, of thinking and dealing with the public health threat of tobacco in aggregate, if not abstract, terms. This past couple of weeks it has become personal.

Today, 3,500 young and invincible kids under the age of 18 in the US will try smoking for the first time. Each day, about 1000 kids will become new regular smokers, adding to the estimated 18,000 high school students in Nevada who currently smoke.

Like Dad, these kids too, will die of something, some day. Let's redouble our efforts to make sure that it's not emphysema or any of the equally horrific ends that await them if today's taunts to invincibility become a lifetime addiction to cigarettes.

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