

Professor John Moxham is Emeritus Professor of Respiratory Medicine at King's College London.

Professor Moxham was the Chair of the first BTS Tobacco Committee and a recipient of the BTS Medal in 2020.

Here he offers us his reflections on the work of the Society on tobacco control, in which he was instrumental.

40 years with BTS

I have been very lucky and have had a long and rewarding career in clinical-academic respiratory medicine.

Now, when I look back over my 46 years in medicine, I think that probably the most exciting and lively times were when I was involved with the BTS and the campaign to ban tobacco advertising.

I joined King's College Hospital as a consultant in 1981 and saw large numbers of patients with severe COPD and hundreds with lung cancer. The community served by the hospital had high levels of deprivation and vast numbers of smokers.

When we travelled on the bus from where we live in Camberwell to the centre of London, via Camberwell Green, Walworth Road, Elephant and Castle, we would pass dozens of huge boards advertising cigarettes.

In the seminal 1962 RCP report "Smoking and Health" one of the key recommendations was the restriction of tobacco advertising. Successive governments abjectly failed to act on this. In the subsequent 20 years the RCP produced further compelling reports, to no avail.

In 1971 the brilliant campaigning organisation, Action on Smoking and Health (ASH), was created and was very active. The BMA also became very interested in tobacco control, and individual respiratory physicians were active in the cause. In a small way I was also trying to do my bit.

Looking through my piles of memorabilia recently I found a story in the South London Press from March 1986, related to "No Smoking Day", which has a picture of me, taken in my outpatient's consulting room. Behind me in the picture is my patient's chest X-ray, showing an obvious lung cancer.

The headline is "Death in a Packet" and in the text my views on the importance of reducing smoking are well quoted.

This was, of course, a long time ago – I did not have to ask the hospital for permission to speak to the reporter, but I did of course ask the patient for permission to show his X-ray! I am sure that respiratory physicians were regularly doing similar things across the country.

In 1990, the BTS formed a Tobacco Committee of which I was the Chair. Many members of the BTS, across the UK, were active in the drive to reduce smoking but a coordinated high-profile campaign was needed to address the problem of advertising. There was a great need to put more pressure on the Government to support the proposal of the European Commission to ban tobacco advertising.

Most EU countries supported the proposal, but the UK did not. To increase the vigour of the campaign the BTS formed Doctors for Tobacco Law (DFTL) in 1991 as a campaigning group. Through DFTL, BTS became a key medical organisation within the tobacco arena – it soon became the first port of call

Member Story – Professor John Moxham



for the media. DFTL was greatly helped by the public relations expertise of Munro and Forster, particularly Alison Munro.

We needed the attention of the media. DFTL held protests at the AGMs of tobacco companies – with the doctors wearing their white coats and carrying placards detailing the huge profits the companies made from each smoker their product killed. DFTL doctors were involved in media debates, phone-ins, TV chat shows and local press features. I did many interviews and television appearances.

The Feedback to the BTS and DFTL from staff in Government departments suggested that the role of doctors was highly influential. The tobacco industry was of course aware of DFTL.

DFTL asked all BTS members to write to their MPs making the case for a ban on advertising cigarettes. Many MPs were clearly supportive, as individuals. In Europe DFTL led demonstrations at the European Parliament and met with MEPs.

DFTL strongly supported Kevin Barron's Private Members Bill, working closely with ASH and the BMA.

There was a letter writing campaign to all MPs and in the Parliamentary debate many MPs referred to these letters. At the end of the debate the House moved that the Bill go forward to the Committee Stage, by 227 votes to 17.

When the Bill returned to the Commons, opponents of the Bill (some known to be strong supporters of the tobacco industry) tabled more than 100 amendments, which consumed all the time available, and the Bill was therefore "talked out".

At this time an NOP Opinion poll showed that 60% of the public supported a ban. Of course, much has happened since those frustrating times.

The EU banned tobacco advertising; the UK then had to follow. The BTS Tobacco committee continues to be very strong and much has been achieved. BTS works very closely with ASH and with the key funders of ASH (The British Heart Foundation and Cancer Research UK).

Regarding myself, I was a board member of ASH for many years and the Chair twice. Currently several of the members of the BTS Tobacco Committee sit on the Board of ASH.

I certainly hope that this is always the case. ASH is a campaigning organisation and charity whose prime purpose is the reduction of smoking.

Over the last 25 years smoking has reduced in the UK faster than in most European countries. Once we were amongst the worst and now, we are almost the best. But there is still much to do. Smoking still remains high on the Burden of Disease tables and is still a major health risk, particularly for the more deprived in our society.

I am sure the BTS will "keep on keeping on".