



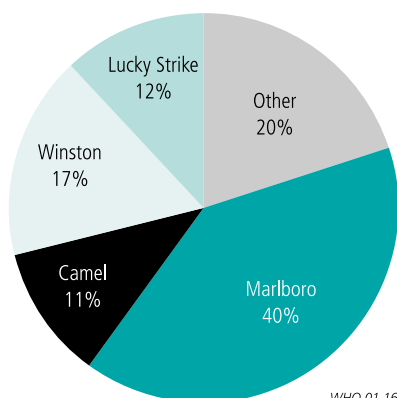
Julia Roberts prepares for a smoke in *My Best Friend's Wedding*



Marlboro man billboard features in *Volcano* as backdrop to film credits

Photographs, courtesy J.D. Sargent

Tobacco brands depicted in films



WHO 01.16
courtesy *The Lancet*

Meanwhile, Walt Disney studios charged companies US\$ 60 000 to have an actor use their product in the film *Mr Destiny*.

Tobacco companies deny that they are paying to have their products featured in films, saying that such deals fall under their voluntary ban. "We don't pay for product placement in movies. We don't even provide products to movie producers," says Daniel Martz, spokesperson for Philip Morris International, maker of Marlboro cigarettes. Though Sargent says there is not any direct evidence that tobacco companies are paying for product placements, he believes the film industry must take responsibility for the message it is sending when it shows tobacco

products in films. US films are marketed to a global audience, and that means they are reaching the same foreign markets that tobacco companies are targeting most now that they face a rapidly declining US market. "Movies are a big social influence. When actors endorse brands, whether they are paid or not, they are marketing a tobacco product to an international audience, and they need to take responsibility for that", Dr Sargent commented to the *Bulletin*. Questioned by the *Bulletin* as to how film actors view the issue, Greg Krizman, National Director of Communications for the US Screen Actors Guild, would only say, "We're very sensitive to it". ■

Christie Aschwanden,
Nederland, Colorado, USA

Salt lowers blood pressure even in non-hypertensive people

Eating a salt-poor, vegetable-rich diet for one month can substantially lower blood pressure in people with above-optimal blood pressure levels, in addition to those who are frankly hypertensive, according to findings of a US study published in the 4 January issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine* by Frank Sacks and fellow members of the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) Sodium Collaborative Research Group. The study, which was supported by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), part of the US National Institutes of Health, involved 412 people with systolic blood pressure levels between 120 mm Hg and 159 mm Hg. Participants were randomly assigned to eat either a typical US diet alone or the vegetable-rich, low-fat, low-carbohydrate, so-called DASH diet alone, at three different levels of daily sodium intake — 3300 mg (average for US), 2400 mg (recommended maximum) and 1500 mg — for each diet. After 30 days, the group on the DASH diet at the lowest sodium intake showed the greatest drop in blood pressure — 7.5 mm Hg and 11.5 mm Hg, for the hypertensive and non-hypertensive participants, respectively, below the final blood pressure levels of those who had eaten the typical US diet. Whichever diet was eaten, the magnitude of the mean drop in blood pressure was inversely related to daily salt intake. The study findings, commented NHLBI Director Claude Lenfant, "lay to rest the long-standing controversy over whether sodium reduction lowers blood pressure in people who do not have hypertension". ■

John Maurice, *Bulletin*

In Brief

Gates gives US\$ 15.1 million for new drugs against African sleeping sickness and leishmaniasis

An international consortium of experts on drug development and delivery is to receive a US\$ 15.1 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to work on new drugs against two tropical parasitic diseases, African sleeping sickness (trypanosomiasis) and leishmaniasis. An estimated 300 000 to 500 000 Africans are infected with African sleeping sickness and about 60 million are at risk. Leishmaniasis is a disease that in its cutaneous form can be as disfiguring and disabling as leprosy and in its visceral form can be fatal if untreated. It infects an estimated 12 million people in 88 countries, and about 350 million people are at risk. Drugs exist for both diseases but are either not effective enough or are too expensive for wide use in the poor countries where these diseases are prevalent or have serious side-effects. The international consortium comprises scientists from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the US, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in the UK, the Swiss Tropical Institute, the Kenya Trypanosomiasis Research Institute, and Immtech International Inc., a US biopharmaceutical firm. ■

Diary

Gates offers US\$ 1 million prize for best health contribution

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has established a US\$ 1 million prize to be awarded annually to an organization that has made an exceptional contribution to the improvement of health throughout the world. Nominations must be received on or before 28 February 2001 by the Global Health Council, a US-based non-profit health organization, which will choose the winner. "Any organization from any country in the world that has substantively improved the health and the lives of people in need may be nominated," the Council has announced. The prize will be awarded on 31 May during the Council's annual international conference in Washington, DC. *Enquiries to: Laurel Mackin, Global Health Council (tel.: +1 202 833 5900; email: gatesaward@globalhealth.org; website: www.globalhealth.org/awards/gates_info.php3).* ■