

VERY recently, the first cigarettes at least partly made of substances other than tobacco were launched onto the market—in Germany and Switzerland. One brand contains an American substitute; the other a German-made one. Imperial Tobacco, which has 65% of the cigarette market in Britain and the largest volume turnover of cigarettes of any company in the EEC, now “hopes that its cigarette, containing its New Smoking Material (NSM) will be on sale to the public within 12 months. Imperial (in conjunction with ICI) has spent £6 million on developing this tobacco substitute and a £13-million factory to produce 30 million pounds of it a year is nearly ready at Ardeer, Scotland. The project is held up by the deliberations of the Hunter Committee—a body set up in 1973 under Dr R. B. Hunter to advise the Secretary of State for Health on guidelines for assessing and testing the risk/benefit ratio of the tobacco substitute; it has yet to report, though it gave Imperial the go-ahead for consumer acceptability trials of its product last August.

Presumably on the basis of these trials the expected “new-smoke” (to use an Orwellian term for an Orwellian concept) is not likely to contain more than 20% of NSM—the rest will be standard cigarette tobacco. I have smoked a cigarette made entirely from NSM and quite see the point. It is

supremely non-addictive. In fact it resembles nothing so much as lighting the wrong end of a filter-tipped cigarette—which is perhaps not too hard to understand since filters are made of cellulose and so is NSM with the difference that NSM is toasted to reduce the

Nosmoke without fire

from Angela Croome

water content and give it a nice dark tobacco colour. The brands launched elsewhere in Europe are much the same—it seems there is no substitute for wood—and one of the German lines has the appealing name “Nosmoke”.

But with 80% tobacco, “no-smoke” it isn't. Nor, one hazards, would a cigarette without nicotine satisfy the complex needs that a cigarette smoker seeks. Curiously the massive research that Imperial has put into improving the smoking (including medical) characteristics of their cigarettes does not at present include measuring the nicotine level. Tar and nicotine delivery are lumped together, and come out at 28.30 micrograms per cigarette as against only 7 micrograms for a cigarette consisting solely of NSM. But Imperial's

philosophy is explicitly that it is the tar that counts, and refers to the classical mouse-skin painting tests. The company claims that not only is there less tar from NSM but that it is a different tar. It is something that toxicology tests on NSM are being run by the independent laboratory with the greatest experience in toxicological testing, the Huntingdon Research Centre, and that screening there includes possible teratogenic effects. It would be even more comforting to know that the Hunter Committee was going to recommend measures and standards of carbon monoxide delivery, implicated in heart disease which smoking is considered to accelerate—and that the committee was going to publish its report which it has no obligation to do.

We are assured that NSM or “Nosmoke” or any other semi-substitute cigarette will not be cheaper—“the Government cannot afford it”; nor of course can the cigarette companies. So the new-smokes must be sold on the “better for you” argument which on the evidence so far is specious. Also one understands that cellulose from wood pulp (the nearest to a specific description of the new smoking material one can get) is cheaper than tobacco. There is no prize for guessing who is going to be better off if the cigarette-smoking public can be persuaded to switch.

It's very exceptional indeed in the Netherlands that an essentially scientific dispute ends with people dragging each other into the courts. Yet this is what happened when two Groningen archaeologists, Drs H. Tj. Waterbolk and D. Stapert, accused a highly esteemed amateur, Tjerk Vermaning, of showing and selling fake Stone Age artefacts.

Vermaning, a 46-year-old mowing machine repairer who has been living on an archaeology grant for several years, replied that one does not readily imitate (for example) a few hundred stone axes, that his accusers are of no scientific standing anyway, that he wants some “real archaeologists” to look into the question, and that he will sue Stapert and Waterbolk for libel.

After being under arrest for two days, Vermaning was released.

The whole affair seems to be the dead-end of a continuing story of trouble-laden cooperation of amateur and scientist. Some ten years ago Vermaning gained national renown and became a local hero by digging up the remains of a Neanderthal camp site with several hundred artefacts in it, among which were various types of fist axes and a number of splinters. The Groningen archaeologists could even restore some of the original firestone knolls, from which Neanderthal man

Neanderthal axes to grind

from Arie de Kool, Rotterdam

had chipped his tools.

Vermaning was very proud of his finds and expected rewards—not just the few hundred pounds that were paid for the stones, but an honorary doctorate and a staff appointment at the institute. The university did not grant this to the astonishingly little educated man (three winters of elementary school, in summertime he had to help his parents), but they thought his talents sufficiently important to give him financial support. Altogether this amounted to some £20,000 over several years.

Vermaning decided, however, that this was not the recognition he was entitled to and he refused to cooperate further—after he had found a new site, again containing several hundred pieces.

Suspicious began to grow, said Dr Stapert, when on a site where Vermaning had found more than 400 pieces, the archaeologists were not able to uncover one single chip more. Vermaning uses this as an argument that the professional people are just not as com-

petent as he, but Stapert began to think that the 400-odd pieces that Vermaning found were just those he might have buried a short while before.

His suspicion was greatly enhanced when he found what he thought to be traces of machining on two of the artefacts, and he became certain when he discovered that the typical shiny surfaces, supposed to be caused by weathering, were what he described as an easily removable recent kind of lacquering.

He called in the police, accusing Vermaning of fraud—not just scientific but also financial, since he had sold recent imitations as genuine, old artefacts. Vermaning was arrested and scientists, police and provincial government called a press conference.

But Vermaning asked the police what proof there was in the statements of people who had refused to recognise him for his discoveries, which amounted to many times what they themselves had been able to dig up. At the same time he accused the scientists of libel and demanded impartial evidence.

In the Netherlands people are wondering who did make the axes, if not Neanderthal man, and also whether it was wise to cause a public rumpus before the matter had been dealt with in court. □