

Addiction Incorporated
Interview with Mitch Zeller, J.D.
December 20th 2011

ActionToQuit: Hello Mitch. Thanks for speaking with us at Partnership for Prevention/ActionToQuit today about the new motion picture “Addiction Incorporated”. Can you tell us a little about yourself and what you do?

Mitch Zeller: *I am a lawyer by training and did not intend to pursue a career in Food Drug Administration (FDA) issues, but now have 30 years of regulatory, legislative and communications experience. My first introduction to tobacco control was in 1994 as a political appointee in the Clinton administration. I then served as associate commissioner and director of the FDA’s Office of Tobacco Programs. Following my time with the FDA, I joined the American Legacy Foundation as the executive vice president and worked extensively on their Truth campaign. I currently work with Pinney Associates, a health policy consulting firm, and have been busy in the past nine years working on tobacco regulatory issues both domestically and globally.*

ActionToQuit: Would you mind giving us a brief overview of “Addiction Incorporated”?

Mitch Zeller: *“Addiction Incorporated” is a new documentary which opened in New York on December 14th. It is the real life story of Victor DeNoble, a scientist recruited by Phillip Morris to conduct secret scientific studies on rats. Victor proved a decade before scientists and government officials concurred that nicotine had the hallmark properties of addiction. Victor considered this an enormous breakthrough. However, Phillip Morris feared the results of the research and fired him, closed down his lab, and withdrew his paper from publication. Then, flash forward ten years later when the FDA begins to investigate the tobacco industry. In our investigation we stumbled across Victor’s name and he told us his whole story. Essentially Victor, after the Phillip Morris waived his confidentiality agreement, became the tobacco industry’s first whistleblower. The movie continues with the expert testimonies, massive lawsuits against the tobacco industry, the FDA’s investigation, and the impact on key players involved. It ends with the signing of the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act.*

ActionToQuit: What is your personal role in the creation or production of the film?

Mitch Zeller: *I was first contacted by the producer in early 2009 to sit for an interview for a movie. When they described the movie, I said “absolutely”. At first I started out as an interviewee in order to describe the narrative and history of the story. Then, a year and half ago the director approached me with footage of the movie he had composed up to that point and wanted to get my thoughts. I gave him some feedback and I have been an advisor ever since.*

ActionToQuit: If you had to summarize the primary purpose of *Addiction Incorporated*, what would it be?

Mitch Zeller: *The primary purpose of the movie is to spotlight the incredible developments that started pouring out with the FDA's investigation, congressional hearings and lawsuits in the mid-90s. With all the changes in the past decades, the most important reminder is: it is all about the nicotine. Nicotine is why DeNoble was hired by Phillip Morris in the first place and it has increasingly come to light that cigarettes are deliberately designed and manipulated to sustain addiction. The movie describes how nicotine works on the brain, the congressional hearings about attempting to regulate cigarettes, and the new legislation. But it leaves us with the question: What are we going to do about it?*

ActionToQuit: Why do you think it took so long after Victor DeNoble's story became public to make this into a film?

Mitch Zeller: *Charlie Evans bought the rights to Victor DeNoble's story in the mid 90's but it took some time to produce the story. He first thought of making the story into a Hollywood fictionalized narrative, but he eventually decided to make it into a documentary. Charlie's idea for the movie began when he saw Victor's 1994 testimony on C-SPAN and soon after bought the rights to the story. The director's commitment to this project has been inspiring. He specially commissioned a companion book to compile all the excellent interviews and documents which were cut from the film so it would fit the one hour and twenty minute time frame. Charlie is unique in that he is a Hollywood producer/director who understands policy change and desires maximum policy impact.*

ActionToQuit: What do you think the tobacco industry's reaction will be to this film?

Mitch Zeller: *I hope the tobacco industry is not happy with it and they see the movie as we see it. At the New York premier there was a packed audience riveted by the eighty minute documentary. Despite the progress we have made in tobacco control the tobacco industry, in the year 2011, is still in the business of selling a product which will kill half of its long term customers. The movie is a reminder to us of the behavior of the tobacco industry.*

ActionToQuit: There have been some comparisons to another movie, the 1999 film *The Insider* with Russell Crowe and Al Pacino. In what ways is "Addiction Incorporated" different from *The Insider*?

Mitch Zeller: *The Insider is a fictionalized account of Jeffrey Wigand, another tobacco industry whistleblower. From what we know the Hollywood version is accurate in its account of his story. The fundamental difference is that "Addiction Incorporated" is a real life story, in documentary form, of DeNoble and other people involved; people like me who were falsely accused of perjury at the time of the FDA investigation. Although we were not threatened with physical harm, our professional careers were jeopardized.*

ActionToQuit: Do you think there are key lessons learned from Victor DeNoble's story that can benefit current tobacco control advocates?

Mitch Zeller: *This is something I discussed with the director - our plan is to hold special screenings of the film at major conferences in 2012. Specifically, in March at the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco (Houston), in March at the World Conference on Tobacco or Health (Singapore), and in August at the National Conference on Tobacco or Health (Kansas City). At these screenings the film's directors and actors will be available to speak. As for key lessons, I hope Victor's story of being fired by Phillip Morris, having his paper withheld from publication, becoming an informant for the FDA, and testifying before Congress conveys a lesson in perseverance and courage. It is also a lesson on how some things have not changed. The tobacco industry continues to view children and adolescents as replacement users for adults who die or quit tobacco use. In light of all the budget constraints and the diversion of Master Settlement Agreement funds, I hope tobacco control advocates will be inspired and rededicate themselves to the good work. We must work together to deprive the industry of its "replacement customers".*

ActionToQuit: It is Partnership for Prevention's wish that this tobacco control film would reach a wide audience. What is it that you hope moviegoers will take away from the experience?

Mitch Zeller: *My interest in the movie focused on how to maximize the policy impact. The movie helps us convey that although the science is not quite there, we are almost at the point where the FDA can establish a regulation to make cigarettes less addictive. The Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act gave the FDA the authority to reduce nicotine content in cigarettes to levels below the threshold for addiction and to regulate compounds which reinforce the effects of nicotine. Cigarettes will continue to be extremely harmful - but imagine a world where the only cigarettes kids can experiment with can no longer sustain addiction! Kids will not stop experimenting, but the experimentation would not necessarily lead to regular smoking, addiction, disease and premature death.*