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“Jesse L. Steinfeld, former anti-smoking U.S. surgeon general, dies at 87”

By [Emily Langer](#)

Jesse L. Steinfeld, who vigorously pursued the national campaign against smoking while serving as U.S. surgeon general during the first term of President Richard M. Nixon, died Aug. 5 in Claremont, Calif. He was 87.

The cause was complications from a stroke, according to his family.

An oncologist formerly associated with the National Cancer Institute, Dr. Steinfeld served as surgeon general from 1969 to 1973. One of his first moves on the job, according to an [account](#) in the book “[Surgeon General’s Warning](#)” by journalist Mike Stobbe, was to remove the ashtrays in his office and display a sign reading, “Thank you for not smoking.”

As surgeon general, Dr. Steinfeld served as head of the U.S. Public Health Service and acted as a national medical educator in chief. He addressed a range of public health concerns, including carcinogens in foods, the use of pesticides and the safety of certain sugar substitutes and detergents. But he became best known for his aggressive initiatives against smoking.

Previous efforts by public health officials — including former surgeon general Luther L. Terry, who linked cigarettes to lung cancer and other diseases in a landmark 1964 report — had begun to curb smoking habits in the United States. Tens of millions of Americans continued to smoke, however, and Dr. Steinfeld led the campaign to make them stop.

Smokers, he declared in a 1971 report, were significantly more likely than nonsmokers to die of lung cancer and cancer of the larynx. The same report linked cigarettes to coronary artery disease.

A pregnant woman who smoked, he said, risked not only her health but also the health and development of the fetus. Tobacco fumes, he said, could be hazardous to nonsmokers exposed to them.

Dr. Steinfeld was in office when smokers began reading the warning that “the surgeon general has determined that cigarette smoking is dangerous to your health.” In 1971, he proposed that smoking be prohibited in public spaces such as buses, trains, airplanes, restaurants and theaters.

“Nonsmokers have as much right to clean and wholesome air as smokers have to their so-called right to smoke, which I would redefine as a right to pollute,” he said at the time.

Representatives of tobacco interests objected strenuously to his contentions. Responding to the 1971 report, the Tobacco Institute asserted that “the question of health and smoking is still a question,” according to an article in Time magazine.

Dr. Steinfeld also spoke about the dangers of violence on television, a topic addressed in a 1972 study by the Office of the Surgeon General. The document, which some critics found too heavily influenced by television executives, held that TV violence could influence some youths but did not harm most young people.

“It is clear to me that the causal relationship between television violence and antisocial behavior by children is sufficient to warrant appropriate and immediate remedial action,” he told a Senate subcommittee in 1972.

After Nixon’s reelection in 1972, he accepted Dr. Steinfeld’s resignation. Years later, the New York Times reported that, while he recognized that many top officials were replaced during the transition, Dr. Steinfeld believed he lost his position because of his work on smoking and television violence.

After leaving the surgeon general’s office, he criticized the Nixon administration, asserting that health programs were “supported or discarded not in relation to their long-range health care value, but in relation to their immediate political public relations value.” He told the Times that he “felt frustrated in seeing how much good I might have achieved, and how much actually was accomplished.”

Jesse Leonard Steinfeld was born Jan. 6, 1927, in West Aliquippa, Pa. His parents, who were Jewish immigrants from Hungary, sold dry goods and later hardware supplies.

Dr. Steinfeld was inspired to study medicine in part by the loss of his father, a heavy smoker who died at a young age from a heart attack. Dr. Steinfeld received a bachelor of science degree from the University of Pittsburgh in 1945 and a medical degree from what is now Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland in 1949.

During the Korean War, while a member of the U.S. Public Health Service, he served aboard a Coast Guard ship in the North Atlantic, his family said.

He taught at institutions including George Washington University and the University of Southern California in the 1950s and 1960s before joining the National Cancer Institute.

As surgeon general, he succeeded [William H. Stewart](#), who, like Terry, had fought smoking in the United States. Before and during his tenure as surgeon general, Dr. Steinfeld served as deputy assistant for health and science in what was then the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

After leaving office, he directed the oncology department at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., and was dean of what was then the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond. He was president of the Medical College of Georgia before his retirement in 1987.

Survivors include his wife of 61 years, Gen M. Stokes Steinfeld of Claremont; three daughters, Mary Beth Steinfeld of Sacramento, Jody Stefansson of Pasadena, Calif., and Susan Steinfeld of La Canada, Calif.; and two grandchildren.

For years after he left the office of surgeon general, Dr. Steinfeld remained active in the campaign against smoking.

“Smoking is an activity which should only be done by consenting adults in private,” he said in 1984. “We should make non-smoking the social norm — smoking should be made unacceptable in society.”

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