

From *Slings And Arrows*, Into The Abyss

Puffing On Polonium?

While Polonium 210 was the *demon du jour* when the *Times* ran the story on thirdhand smoke covered earlier in this book, the evil element had actually been featured in the *Times* three years previously, on December 1, 2006, and it also featured an emphasis on that hapless Russian spy. In this case, however, “Puffing On Polonium” was written by a prominent Antismoker who seemed to be seeking absolution from the antismoking community for his somewhat “inconvenient” book, *The Nazi War On Cancer*.ⁱ

Dr. Robert Proctor’s book, published in 2001, presented well-researched and indisputable details on one of the largest antismoking movements in modern history: the one implemented by Hitler’s Third Reich as part of his drive to perfect the ultimate “Healthy Aryan Race.”

No one could fault Proctor’s book for its research, but it was a profound embarrassment to the United States antismoking community at a time when it was trying to pooh-pooh the idea that its push for smoking bans was somehow too authoritarian and would spread to private clubs, the open air, or even into people’s private homes. In the early 2000s, American Antismokers were getting desperate. They’d gotten undreamed of amounts of money from the Master Settlement Agreement’s “invisible tax” on smokers, but their push for smoking bans seemed stuck in California. The last thing they needed was a reminder of their Nazi roots.

So, when the Russian spy was dosed in November of 2006, Dr. Robert Proctor must have been quite pleased to be able to write a highly profiled Op-Ed piece for the *New York Times* that would help reestablish his credentials as a card-carrying Antismoker worthy of future grant money and the respect of his annoyed colleagues.ⁱⁱ

The Radioactive Russian

Dear Editor,

Dr. Robert Proctor's opportunistic slap at smokers following the KGB assassination of a Russian bureaucrat is a classic example of the scientific distortion routinely employed to promote smoking bans.

He correctly notes that a cigarette emits .04 picocuries of radiation, but then goes on to speak of the Litvinenko assassination while adding up all the cigarettes smoked in the entire world to develop a scary picture. Examining individuals produces a very different story.

According to MSNBC, Litvinenko was dosed with five millicuries, or 125 billion cigarettes' worth of smoke. A worker in a decently ventilated modern casino would inhale at most about 1/10th of a cigarette per shift, requiring 1.25 trillion days to reach that 5 millicurie dose. At fifty workweeks per year, that translates to working for five billion years to get the Russian's dose.

But wait: polonium's half-life is 138 days, so we'd have to suspend the laws of physics itself or the dose would simply *never* be reached!

So when Dr. Proctor glibly claims, "No one knows how many people may be dying from the polonium part of tobacco," he's correct only in the sense that it's too outlandish a thought for anyone but an avowed Antismoker to even consider.

ⁱ Proctor R. *The Nazi War On Cancer*, Princeton University Press, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Proctor R. "Puffing On Polonium," *New York Times*, December 1, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/01/opinion/01proctor.html>.
