

## INDUSTRY WATCH

### Propaganda hit squad at large

David Simpson

Last October, British American Tobacco (BAT) organised press conferences in South Africa and Sri Lanka, to try to "restore the balance" of public perception of the health risks of smoking. In early October, the United Tobacco Company Limited, BAT's South African associate, paid for senior journalists from South Africa, Malawi, and Mauritius to attend a seminar at the luxurious Mount Sheba resort in the Eastern Transvaal. The speakers included a range of tobacco industry apologists (alternatively described as independent experts and respected academics) who had appeared previously on tobacco industry platforms elsewhere.

Jean Boddewyn, Professor of Marketing and International Business at Baruch College, New York, USA, was there, as ever, to dispute the fact that tobacco advertising affects total consumption.

Philip Witorsch, Professor of respiratory medicine, George Washington University, USA, was dealing with passive smoking, claiming that "our analysis of the data reveals that there is little to no good evidence that chronic exposure to environmental tobacco smoke is a health risk to adults". On a previous trip for the industry, Witorsch conceded in an Australian court that maternal smoking caused increased chest disease in children under a year old. Here in South Africa, perhaps fearing that some well-informed journalist might know this, he even started by referring to that case, but not to his own statements: he quoted instead that the court had noted that "the question whether passive smoking causes disease in non-smokers is a question upon which scientific research and discussion is continuing". Later on, however, he seemed unable to resist a return to maternal smoking, saying that although it appeared to harm pre-school children, there was no such finding for older children; and even for the younger ones, the role of confounding variables remained to be elucidated.

Professor Witorsch did not mention that in an earlier, closed meeting with the South African health minister he had admitted that smoking caused lung cancer, according to a letter in the *Argus* from Derek Yach on 18 October 1993. On this problem, however, his colleague Dr Sharon Boyse, head of the Smoking Issues Department at BAT's headquarters in the UK, was far from silent. She reeled off a list of other risk factors that had been associated with lung cancer, summarising her industry's position as: "smoking has not been proven to be a cause of disease, and that



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smoking is simply a 'risk marker' for diseases like lung cancer, in the same way that driving licences are risk markers for car accidents".

Other speakers included Digby Anderson, a political writer of robustly conservative views and head of a private "think-tank" on social and political issues, the Social Affairs Unit in London, who dealt with tobacco advertising and freedom of commercial speech; John Rupp, senior lawyer at the firm Covington & Burling, Washington, USA, whose paper was entitled "'Fear of living' and social engineering in the late twentieth century"; and Ian Hindmarch, Professor of Human Psychopharmacology at the University of Surrey, UK, whose theme was that "addiction is not a tenable label by which to explain tobacco use".

These speakers generated large-scale coverage under headlines such as "Smoking risk exaggerated - health message simplistic" (*Cape Times*, 7 October 1993) and a two-page special report in the *Weekend Argus* a fortnight later with an account of each speaker's 20-minute presentation. This latter report appeared despite a strong barrage of replies in the intervening period, led by the Medical Research Council's Essential Health Research Group and the National Council Against Smoking. The issue was still running over a month later, with an apparently shameless tobacco industry propaganda machine feeding the press with a constant stream of replies,



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superficially plausible, to try to undermine the scientists' statements.

In Sri Lanka, however, a strikingly similar exercise later the same month, using most of the same individuals, initially may have scored an even greater propaganda success. Unlike South Africa, Sri Lanka had little past history of such tactics and local medical and health organisations needed to seek advice before responding. Under headlines proclaiming "Anti-smoking campaign comes under heavy fire" and "Consultants rule out lung cancer, heart", *The Island* newspaper carried an extensive report on a press conference hosted by BAT's local subsidiary, Ceylon Tobacco Company. The international team insisted that smoking could not be linked to lung cancer or heart disease and accused the mass media of being biased against smoking. Sharon Boyse of BAT was reported this time as saying that there was "absolutely" no "laboratory proof" that smoking was directly related to lung cancer or heart disease. There was, she said, only statistical or epidemiological proof to this effect which was, according to her, not substantial either. Her reported list of risk factors for lung cancer this time included keeping pet

birds and ethnic factors. This time, the team included Richard Wagner, Professor of Economics, George Mason University, Virginia, USA, who asserted that the World Health Organisation spent extravagantly on meetings and consultations and was confused over its priorities.

These propaganda campaigns by the industry have been seen for many years in industrialised countries. This latest effort by BAT suggests that these campaigns will be targeted more intensively at developing regions. Tobacco control advocates need to prepare themselves to counter such activities. There have been a number of publications on how to deal with this sort of thing, which fellow advocates may be able to supply. In addition, it may be advisable to ask international colleagues for assistance, if possible (for speed) via the International Union Against Cancer's GLOBALink information network. As the story above illustrates, it is likely that the same tobacco industry personnel have already been involved in similar activities elsewhere, and some ready-made antidotes to their propaganda may be easily obtained.