SPEAKING PERSONALLY

147 000 pieces of silver

I had never taken a particularly close interest in the effects of smoking on health. It all appeared rather obvious—cigarettes were bad for you, and any further investigation seemed unlikely to lead to an unforeseen conclusion.

After five year's employment as head of public communication at the UK Medical Research Council (MRC), in 1994 I learned that one of our units (a group of scientists directly employed by the MRC) was on the point of accepting a £147 000 grant from British American Tobacco (BAT) to fund work into the effect of nicotine on Alzheimer's disease. Needless to say, the offer was hedged with mentions of "no strings", and "complete freedom".

The information came from the MRC's Technology Transfer Group, who, far from questioning the acceptability of taking the money, were simply asking how it should be paid. I subsequently discovered that they had actually solicited it; the original funder of the work had pulled out after discovering that the patent on this use of nicotine lay with the tobacco industry.

Despite the fact that I was responsible for advising on issues likely to affect the MRC's relations with the media, politicians, and the public, I was not asked for my views by those responsible for taking the decision on this matter. All the same, I made it clear in writing that I felt very strongly that the money should not be accepted.

I was seriously concerned about the effect that disclosure of such funding would have on my employer's reputation. I found it particularly shocking that the first government supported organisation in the world to warn of the link between smoking and cancer should be considering taking money from cigarette makers. The MRC had a long and distinguished history of scientific discovery—the cause of rickets, the influenza virus, magnetic resonance imaging, monoclonal antibodies, genetic fingerprinting, and a list of important molecular structures longer than your arm—and one of their strengths was that they were accountable to Parliament and the taxpayer. Not for them any worry that their research might be directed to produce results with a bearing on the company share price. It was, I thought, purely directed by the spirit of scientific enquiry with the long term aim of improving health. This, in my view, made them an organisation unique in UK medical research.

So would people be able to trust the MRC as an impartial source of scientific knowledge if they were to accept BAT funding? It was clear to me that the answer was no, and that there was likely to be a public outcry. Was it possible to quietly conceal acceptance of such funding? Even more clearly, no. If a parliamentary ques-

tion were to be asked, we would have to answer it truthfully. We would also have to declare it in the MRC handbook, which listed all current research projects and their funding sources.

But, despite all my misgivings—and I was not the only person having them—it was decided to go ahead. I tried to persuade senior management to change their minds, to no avail. They argued that because they were planning to draw up a "watertight" contract, which would restrict BAT's influence not only over the research programme but over publication and any subsequent promotion of the results, we had nothing to worry about. The respectability by association which BAT would gain from this collaboration did not seem to be a matter of concern; neither did the guilt by association of the MRC.

I then began to worry about my own position. It seemed obvious that the "donation", as we were told to call it, could not be hidden for ever. Sooner or later someone was going to spot it and ask questions. Not only did I feel uncomfortable personally with the prospect of defending the decision, I did not think that it was in the MRC's best interests to do so. Better by far to admit it was a mistake and would not happen again. It was clear, though, from conversations with management, that I would be required to come up with some kind of defence if asked. I therefore placed a note on the file officially recording that I would be unable to do so. No action was taken at the time, except that the note mysteriously disappeared and I had to replace it.

The next year was unhappy. The story did not come out, but I was conscious every day that it might. By the second year, I was starting to bury my head in the sand. Maybe we would get away with it. So when the senior press officer came to tell me that he had just received "the call we've been dreading for two years" I didn't know at first what he meant.

From then on things went swiftly downhill. No admission of a mistake was to be contemplated, while every effort was made to justify the acceptance of the BAT money. The press officer and I both said that we were unwilling to handle any media calls, if this were to be the MRC's line. We felt that our reputations for being honest and open with the press would suffer. This in turn would have a damaging effect on the MRC's previously good relations with journalists. Attempts were made to persuade us to change our minds before we were told, grudgingly, that we could stay out of it.

When the Sunday Times journalist who had uncovered the story called me at home, he told me that the unit director concerned now said that he regretted taking the money. He then asked whether I thought the acceptance of the funding could be justified. I said that I did not,

and that I had advised against it on the grounds that it would damage the MRC's reputation.

The rest is no less painful to describe in any detail for taking place more than three years ago. I was sent home, then suspended, faced a disciplinary hearing, and was dismissed for "gross misconduct", but not before I had been offered money to go away quietly and tell no-one of the reasons for my leaving.

I took the MRC to an employment tribunal—and lost. When my lawyer came out of a private meeting with the tribunal chairwoman to tell me that she had said she did not understand what evidence I could produce in my defence—"even Hitler's press officer would have had to obey orders"—I knew that it was hopeless. The MRC barrister portrayed me as an anti-tobacco activist pursuing my own agenda. At one stage I had used the phrase "getting into bed with the enemy" to describe the BAT collaboration; I was astonished to

hear this cited in an attempt to prove that I was not acting in my employer's best interests!

So what did I learn from all this? That funding pressures can force public medical research bodies into consorting with the tobacco industry against their private better judgements; and that people of limited courage will betray their ideals and their colleagues for an easy life. Most importantly, had circumstances not forced me to take an interest, I might still only be vaguely aware of the health catastrophe that tobacco causes, and that its strict control is an absolute necessity if we are to prevent millions of unnecessary premature deaths across the world.

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The MRC were invited to comment, but declined.