

NEWS ANALYSIS

All articles written by David Simpson unless otherwise attributed. Ideas and items for News Analysis should be sent to David Simpson at the address given on the inside front cover.

Suckers today, smokers tomorrow?

A recent *Industry Watch* (*Tobacco Control*; 2001;10:253–7) explored an “experiment in progress”—the use of snus (oral snuff) by Sweden’s males as a possible substitute for cigarette smoking and as a way to reduce male lung cancer. A recent study commissioned by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and conducted by the American Health Foundation found that levels of tobacco specific nitrosamines (TSNAs), the principal class of carcinogens in snuff, were only 1.8 µg/g for ETTAN, the most popular Swedish brand versus 41.1 µg/g for Copenhagen the most popular US brand. Swedish Match selects special tobacco blends and employs a new fermentation process to prevent formation of TSNAs. It could be argued that the low levels in Ettan make it “safer”. However, the Ettan levels (1800 parts per billion) are still hundreds of times greater than what would be allowed in regulated products; for example, the limits for NDELA, another, non-tobacco nitrosamine in bacon and beer, are 5 and 10 parts per billion respectively.

The prevalence of daily smoking among Sweden’s males has fallen from 36.3% in 1980 to 17.1% in 1998. However, male snus use increased only modestly during the period from 16.6% to 18.2%, making it difficult to attribute the decline in male smoking to smokers switching to snus.

Sweden has been one of the most progressive European nations in curbing smoking through bans on advertising, taxation, and treatment of tobacco dependence. The US experience has shown that such comprehensive efforts contribute to large

declines in tobacco use. The states of California and Massachusetts have conducted well funded comprehensive tobacco control campaigns. Both campaigns have aggressively passed tobacco control policies including taxation, eliminating public smoking, aggressive counter-advertising, crackdowns on tobacco sales to minors, and treatment of smokers. In 1998, the male smoking rate for California was 15.1% and Massachusetts 15%. In 1999, male use of chewing tobacco and snuff was only 2.4% in California. Massachusetts stopped measuring snuff use when it fell below 1% in 1993.

Swedish Match has recently introduced a new brand of oral snuff called Exalt into two test markets in the USA, Ohio and North Carolina, and is advertising the product on its website. It is a teabag pouch of oral snuff that has low levels of TSNAs and the user doesn’t have to spit. The website is marketing the product not as a complete substitute for cigarette smoking, but as a temporary replacement where smoking is banned—airlines, worksites, theatres, and homes. There is little or no information in the site on the dangers of smoking, how to quit smoking, or the differences in health risks between smoking and smokeless tobacco use. Clearly, the product is being marketed as a complement to continued smoking.

Two US companies, Star Scientific and US Smokeless Tobacco Company, are about to launch similar low TSNA, spitless tobacco products. Swedish Match’s strategy may be appealing to cigarette manufacturers since it does not promote quitting and may counteract the cessation effects generated by clean indoor air laws. Also, the product is cheap, costing a fraction of the price of nicotine gum or patches. This price difference may result in the pharmaceutical industry reducing their promotion of cessation medications if potential quitters turn to “safe” snuff rather than nicotine gum.

Another possible unintended consequence of a “snus experience” could be youth initiation into smoking. In

the 1980s, the United States Tobacco Company targeted non-smoking young males with low nicotine, snuff starter products. The company employed a “graduation” strategy that intended new users to “graduate” up to higher nicotine brands over time. Among US 17–18 year old males, oral snuff use soared from 0.3% in 1970 to 2.9% in 1985, an eightfold increase. A Washington State study found that snuff became a nicotine entry product for young males who switched to cigarette smoking as they grew older.

Tobacco companies—Swedish or American—want to make money and the health of people is not part of the bottom line. The Swedish experiment could become an “increased harm experiment” where continued smoking is supported, clean indoor air laws weakened, and pharmaceutical companies that promote cessation products driven out of the marketplace. Since tobacco products are not regulated, we should be very cautious in arguing that one product is “safer” than another. It is a dynamic environment where all tobacco manufacturers will work together to promote each other’s products and addiction to nicotine. We should be very careful in choosing our tobacco bedfellows.

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Kenya: tobacco rally leaves health a wreck

The gruelling Safari Rally, formerly the East African Safari, is said to be the world’s toughest, longest motor rally, and the most exciting for spectators. It has been running for nearly half a century, and in recent years has become one of the most aggressive forms of tobacco promotion in the world. When leading sponsor British American Tobacco (BAT) switched promotional tactics in the late 1990s to sponsor soccer, Philip Morris clearly saw a major opportunity and

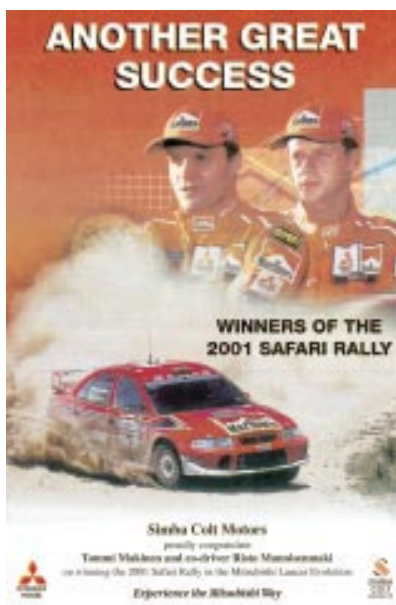


Motor sports, such as the Kenyan Safari Rally, still provide massive publicity for tobacco companies such as Philip Morris (Marlboro), who took over sponsorship of the rally from BAT (555).

the event became known as the Marlboro Rally. However, in the 1990s protests by health organisations brought about changes in the name of the event and the sponsorship arrangement—but not in the saturation coverage associating Marlboro cigarettes with courage, excitement, vitality, and success.

In July 2001, 41 cars set off on the 2600 km (1600 mile) route across largely tough and inhospitable terrain. Three days later, just 15 cars finished the course, led by the famous Finnish driver Tommi Makinen and his co-driver Risto Mannisenmaki. Around 1500 foreign journalists covered the rally, and among their output was a daily 26 minute video bulletin of the latest highlights, distributed to 186 countries and reaching an estimated 460 million people. Not surprisingly, Kenyans were among those most directly caught in the slipstream of all the publicity. Four national television stations beamed exciting clips of the rally in every news bulletin and sports programme, day and night, and the print media was drenched with pictures of Marlboro cars, not just in news pictures, but in advertisements for Mitsubishi, the Marlboro team's car. Forty five per cent of Kenyans were estimated to have seen coverage of the rally, either on television, in newspapers and magazines, or as spectators.

In addition to the winning car, Marlboro saw six of its other vehicles complete the rally at Nairobi's Kenyatta International Conference Centre. While things may have changed superficially since 1995, when children were pictured actually



standing on BAT's 555 cigarette branded car, the majority of the hundreds of people at the finishing line this year were reported to be children under 18 years old.

With the rally achieving such massive publicity, and having such obvious appeal to youth, Philip Morris must feel its investment has been well worthwhile. In many countries that received media coverage of the event, advertising bans have forced the traditional Marlboro cowboy to ride off into the sunset. But motor sport drivers have become the cowboys of today: tough and healthy, fearless and independent—ideal heroes of the young.

Like its predecessor BAT, Philip Morris says it observes strict standards of responsible promotion in all its markets nowadays.

Spain: wedded to tobacco

Spain has undergone extraordinary changes over the past half century, metamorphosing from a dictatorship governing a mainly peasant society to a thriving democracy whose economy ranges from tourism to heavy engineering, agriculture to aerospace. In a country with such a long and illustrious history, a fount of culture over many centuries, and which was at one time a colonial superpower governing most of Latin America, tradition is bound to be strong. And while progress often demands compromise and change where traditions are concerned, one area of tradition

that remains remarkably intact is tobacco.

Not only does Spain persist in maintaining its status as one of the black spots of Europe in terms of tobacco consumption and disease, but the stuff is still apparently an unquestioned part of the social fabric, too. A health advocate from the UK recently described her astonishment at the wedding of a young Spanish woman who was all too well educated about tobacco: her father did not live to see his daughter married, having smoked all his adult life and died of lung cancer at the age of 50.

But at the celebratory wedding meal, what was in the traditional baskets of personalised gifts brought round from table to table by the happy couple, and handed to all the guests? Boxes, beautifully hand decorated with hearts and flowers and the names of the bride and groom, containing cigarettes for all the women, and cigars for the men. So much is tobacco a part of Spanish wedding tradition that cigarette gift boxes ready for decoration are to be found in



Tobacco is such a part of Spanish wedding tradition that cigarette gift boxes, inscribed with the names of the bride and groom, are often handed out to guests.

the country's specialist wedding shops. No wonder public health has such an uphill struggle when it is battling not only against tobacco companies, addiction, ineffective politicians, and incomplete public understanding of the problem, but such deeply ingrained tradition, too.

China: however remote, Marlboro is there

Urumqi, in the extreme north-west Xinjiang Province of China, could be regarded as one of the remotest cities on earth, yet at the same time—nestling between Mongolia, Russia, and northern Pakistan—the centre of Asia.

Yet even here, in the “Wild West” of China, the Marlboro cowboy already rides the range. During one day at China's 10th National Conference on Smoking and Health in Xinjiang, I stopped counting the Marlboro hats at 300, shading the eyes of men and women alike in the bright sunlight and 50°C temperature. They were far more stylish than any other hat in sight, and therein lies a problem. Philip Morris might say it does not sell these hats, but if they are being produced by some local entrepreneur, it is highly unlikely there are any copyright or patent cases pending. But it is very much in Philip Morris's interest for the hats to be widely worn—they are walking advertisements for its product.

China banned all electronic and print advertising in 1992, but the national law did not cover either sponsorship or other promotion, or outdoor advertising (which still depends on each local city's administration, and is therefore applied haphazardly throughout the country).

The smoking rates in China have not decreased in the last 20 years and the population increases during this period means that there are now more smokers. It is disappointing that the



Marlboro advertising, this time on hats, manages to appear in the most remote parts of the world.



A glossy BAT brochure showing scenes from TV commercials in its youth campaign.

10th World Conference on Tobacco or Health in Beijing in 1997 has not resulted in any great leap forward. With about two thirds of men and 4% of women smoking in China, no stone should be left unturned in bringing down these high male rates and preventing a rise in smoking among girls and women.

No country can ever sit back and relax, even after major tobacco legislation such as the 1992 law in China. It is now time for the single health warning to be replaced by much stronger, rotating warnings; for smoke-free areas to be extended; for tobacco tax policy to be reviewed; and for the advertising ban to be strengthened to include a ban on all forms of advertising, sponsorship and promotion—including the Marlboro hats in remote Xinjiang.

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Bangladesh: analysing BAT's youth programme

Research by a coalition of health groups has led to strong condemnation of a new scheme launched in July by BAT. BAT described its programme as a “comprehensive campaign on youth smoking prevention”, and it was formally launched by Bangladesh's Home Secretary at a meeting in a prestigious hotel, attended by a large group of what BAT calls “stakeholders”. BAT loves

that word, part of a sophistry in its ongoing public relations war against effective health measures. The term implies that BAT is working in a responsible partnership with all sorts of people and organisations that, like it or not, have a “stake” in what the company clearly intends is the continuing, business-as-usual process of tobacco promotion and sales. “Stakeholders” include members of the government, media, non-government organisations, and celebrities.

However, health groups are urging people not to cooperate with the campaign, pointing out that it is only intended to improve BAT's image and to prevent effective tobacco control action being taken. Work for a Better Bangladesh, Bangladesh Anti-Tobacco Alliance, and PATH Canada published a damning report about BAT's campaign, which closely resembles others BAT is running elsewhere, especially in developing countries where at present the company does not face serious restrictions on cigarette promotion.

The health groups' report includes the results of detailed focus group research and a survey of 300 boys aged 12–15 years. Most of the boys in the survey (88%) said they had never smoked, with only 3% reporting currently smoking at least one cigarette a week; however, as with the focus group participants, they were familiar with cigarette ads, especially those for BAT brands. Almost all the boys (96%) reported having seen a cigarette ad on television, and 81% of these had seen ads for Gold Leaf and

69% Benson & Hedges (B&H), both BAT brands. In addition, 78% said they had seen a B&H rock concert. While most had seen them on TV, 11% said they had seen one live, despite BAT's claim that they do not allow people under 18 to attend the concerts. Those who watch TV rarely were as likely as those who watch it frequently to have seen a B&H concert, implying either great frequency of concert showings, or that students make an effort to see them. The likelihood of having seen a B&H rock concert also varied little by age, with the majority in all age groups having seen one. The report quotes one young student's conclusion: "The first goal of Benson & Hedges rock concerts is to publicise their company, and indirectly to attract adolescents to smoking."

India: Swedish Match steps in

Swedish Match, a large manufacturer of smokeless tobacco products based in Sweden, purchased the largest match company in India (WIMCO) in 1997. Although WIMCO had nothing to do with tobacco products, those concerned about health were apprehensive that the takeover might lead to Swedish Match launching new smokeless tobacco products in India.

These fears proved not to be unfounded. In April, Swedish Match launched a new smokeless tobacco product in India with a brand called Click. Although the company has made claims for the safety of its smokeless tobacco products in Sweden, and its products are being supported by some as harm reduction strategy for smoking (see "Suckers today, smokers tomorrow" above), no such claims were made while launching Click. The reason given for the launch by Lennart Sunder, president and chief executive officer of Swedish Match was simply: "India has a long tradition of smokeless tobacco use and thus offers exciting business opportunities to Swedish Match in its strategic focus in this category."

Currently there are few restrictions on the advertising and sale of smokeless tobacco products in India. The situation may change soon as a comprehensive bill is under consideration in the Parliament that would ban advertising of all tobacco products. Swedish Match has probably launched Click specifically at this time so as to be able to advertise this new product before a bill is passed into a law and comes into effect.



Advertisement appearing in an Indian newspaper for Click, Swedish Match's new smokeless tobacco product.

India has a huge smokeless tobacco problem—40% of all tobacco consumed is in smokeless form. The health consequences of tobacco use in India are huge. A substantial portion of the 630 000 premature deaths attributable to tobacco each year is attributable to smokeless tobacco. In a recently reported cohort study, the age adjusted relative risk of all cause mortality among women who used smokeless tobacco was 1.35, whereas for men who smoked it was 1.63. There is a large variety of smokeless tobacco products in India, but so far they have all been indigenous. The entry of a multinational further complicates a situation that is already very serious.

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Mongolia: Marlboro man shoots himself in the foot

What can Philip Morris (PM) be thinking of? Earlier this year, the corporate affairs executive of its Mongolian subsidiary walked into the office of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), the only international non-governmental organisation working on tobacco and disease projects in Mongolia, and invited them to a meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in June. It was for "members of parliament and

selected officials from relevant ministries and government agencies", he said, and was mainly intended to discuss tobacco, import taxes, and cigarette smuggling issues. It later emerged that PM was expecting 50 to 60 government officials and politicians to show up, and its invitation letters stated that the Mongolian parliament was one of the organisers.

In the event, a mere dozen or so were present to see the PM team labouring through a lengthy presentation, which turned out to be a translation of the company's position paper on the Framework Convention. At the end, the only senior government official present, Dr Sodnompil, state secretary at the Ministry of Health, stood up and gave it to the cowboy folks in no uncertain terms. Mongolia, he said, strongly supported the Framework Convention. End of story, except that he added a strongly critical comment or two about efforts by tobacco companies to weaken the country's tobacco control legislation. Appropriately, he then left the meeting. An ADRA representative made a similar, short and unequivocal comment, then also left the meeting.

Three days later, the press office of the State Ikh Khural (the Mongolian parliament) took the unusual step of issuing a stinging press release protesting about the Philip Morris Company and its Mongolian office. PM had illegally used the Mongolian parliament's name, it said, while conducting publicity for its tobacco



Wills Sport, the latest name in fashion wear now being promoted in India.

products. It had stated in its invitation to the meeting that the Mongolian parliament was one of the organisers of the event. “However, they did not receive official permission from the Mongolian parliament to do this. One of the ways that this company, which has lost customers in countries that have strong laws against tobacco, has tried to hook children, young people, and women on smoking is by violating the laws and regulations of the independent country of Mongolia by using the name of its supreme law making organ, the Mongolian parliament. The Philip Morris Company must bear the responsibility for the negative consequences incurred by using the name of the parliament”. If only . . .

It is good when a sheriff supports the good guys in any cowboy story; even better when he upholds the law vigorously and fires shots in the air to warn the bandits; and best of all when he knocks the bad guys reeling, with dirt on their face.

India: Where there’s a Wills, there’s a way (round ad bans)

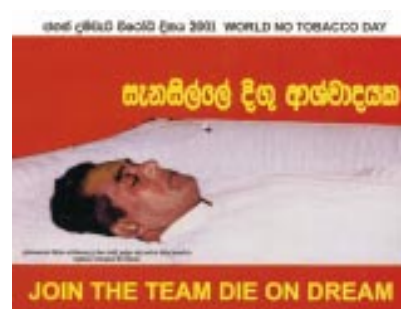
When BAT’s Indian subsidiary, ITC, announced a self imposed ban on tobacco promotion early this year, it

placed large advertisements in leading newspapers announcing it would be stopping all sports sponsorship as part of the deal. This included its major support of cricket, the national game with near cult status among the young; India’s famous cricket team was sponsored by Wills. Few can have thought that ITC/BAT had suffered a *crise de conscience*, and even if some optimists thought the company might find it more difficult to associate its lethal product with healthy sporting images, they cannot have doubted that it would be working on a contingency plan. Very soon, at least part of that plan was revealed—not just a contingency, but a whole new strategy not only to make up for the loss of sports sponsorship, but to take the company into a new era of tobacco promotion.

The trouble with sport in a country like India is that its appeal is mainly to boys and men. An unbelievably large pot of gold awaits cigarette companies who can entice Indian women, who apart from a few pockets of traditional forms of tobacco use, are non-smokers, to take up smoking. So what better than a plan that not only links Wills cigarettes with sports, but also adds fashionable, chic, successful and smart associations, with equal potential to appeal to girls and young women as to their male counterparts? Step forward Wills Sport, the latest name in fashion wear now being promoted in Indian cities in the press, at gleaming new Wills Lifestyle shops, and via the internet. With complementary ranges of designer items aimed at both sexes, it looks as if this self proclaimed responsible company has found an effective new way of promoting its wares with desirable, healthy, and clean images, thereby minimising public perception of any association with addictiveness, cancer, respiratory illness, and cardiovascular disease, and the smell and stain of the several thousand chemicals produced in every puff of its products.

Sri Lanka: another nail in BAT’s coffin

Following BAT’s humiliation in 1999, when its ocean going yacht



Poster representing Mr Cecil Perera, who died from smoking related cancer, lying in his coffin.

John Player Gold Leaf was prevented from entering the port of Galle (*Tobacco Control* 2000;9:9–15), popular feeling against tobacco promotion has continued to grow. In April, there was widespread media coverage of the death of Cecil Perera, a cancer patient who in 1997 filed a lawsuit against the Ceylon Tobacco Company (CTC), BAT’s Sri Lankan subsidiary, claiming compensation for his ill health. His case had also received further publicity when he later participated in seminars with former “Winston man” Alan Landers when Landers visited Sri Lanka. On the day of Mr Perera’s funeral, a number of attacks were reported on CTC’s distribution vans.

To mark World No Tobacco Day on 31 May 2001, the Swarna Hansa Foundation produced a poster representing Mr Perera lying in his coffin, which was displayed on walls in Polonnaruwa, where the dead man had been living. The poster looks like one of CTC’s Gold Leaf advertisements, and includes the slogan “long satisfaction” borrowed from CTC. Its caption says, “Cecil Perera, the smoking-related cancer patient who filed action for damages, passed away prematurely.” The bottom line of copy, “Join the Team, Die on Dream”, is a pastiche of Gold Leaf’s ubiquitous “Join the Team, Live the Dream” slogan. Swarna Hansa hopes that actions of this sort will arouse the feelings of young people against tobacco promotion, and help the public to identify the real culprits in the continuing tragedy of disease and premature deaths caused by tobacco.