LETTERS

Studying the Hungarian anti-smoking movement

Carter describes how tobacco companies infiltrated into tobacco control movements in order to damage their efforts. Industry documents on Hungary suggest similar intentions. The transnational tobacco corporations (TTCs) jumped into the new market and privatized the factories of the formerly state owned Hungarian tobacco monopoly in the very first years of the transition from communism (1991-92). Using their sophisticated lobbying practices, the TTCs succeeded in transforming the regulatory framework of tobacco and easing marketing and trade restrictions on their products. As Philip Morris put it, they sought to protect “the legitimate interests of the company . . . against discriminatory or unfair legislation and practices.” The Hungarian anti-smoking movement was relatively inexperienced in neutralising the political and economical power of a world wide and influential industry. Nonetheless, documents show the TTCs intended to monitor closely and counteract its efforts.

In February 1993, Gabor Garamszegi, CA Manager of Philip Morris Hungary, received a request placed at assessing “the social context of smoking in Hungary”. The submission came from the formerly state owned Tobacco Institute (Dohánykutató és Menedzselés Intézet Kutató és Fejlesztő Rt.), which had no previous experience in assessing the social and health issues in tobacco use. The plan states that “tobacco and smokers have become stigmatized among the health care and public health sector” and its authors considered smoking nothing more than “a scapegoat for the deteriorating health condition of the population”.

The authors acknowledged that the tobacco company “succeeded in putting tobacco control higher on the political agenda and gained power from the increasing involvement of its members into the international tobacco control efforts. This challenge requires appropriate reactions from the tobacco industry”, with the document proposing that a panel of smoking volunteers be formed who could be “regularly questioned to learn the public opinion on social issues”. Members of these panels should be sent to collect information with the aim of learning more about the programmes of anti-tobacco organisations: “As a possible method it could be envisaged that members of the panels ... also take part in these programs and pass on their experiences to the leaders of the panels.”

Another document also mentions the “tight monitoring of activities and plans of government and anti-smoking groups” as an important strategy to “maintain the social acceptability of smoking”, since the “growing anti-smoking sentiments ... would damage the ability of the company in all business area to represent and defend company interests”.

More recently, British American Tobacco has engaged in launching a “social dialogue” with tobacco control advocates and government based agencies. This is another effort of TTCs to portray themselves as if they are changed, contrite, and reformed.

Hungary today faces an increasing epidemic of smoking related diseases, with 28 000 deaths (3.5 million people of 10 million population are smokers) attributable to smoking every year. The country ranks first in the world regarding mortality from lung and oral cancers.

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Events of 11 September 2001 significantly reduced calls to the New Zealand Quitline

New Zealand has a national (free) telephone Quitline service that is promoted through regular mass media campaigns. Data are routinely collected on the over 100 callers per day. We used this data source to investigate the impact of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the USA on calls to this service.

On Wednesday 12 September (11 September in New York was 12 September in New Zealand) there was a sudden decline in the number of new callers to the Quitline (only 137 callers relative to 237 on the previous day—a 42% reduction). Similarly, relative to the preceding Wednesday, the number of new callers was down by 41%.

The effect was felt for at least several weeks. There was an overall 35% drop in the total number of new callers per week, when comparing the five weeks before 11 September with the five weeks afterwards. Using a generalised linear model we found an interaction between a “September 11” effect and time (week) (p = 0.002). Details of the model and the graphed results are available on a website.

It appears that quitting “dropped off the personal agenda” for some New Zealand smokers in September 2001. It seems likely that at this time of increased media publicity of global security threats, the quitting plans of smokers were eclipsed by other concerns. For example, the psychological impact of these events appears to have been significant—at least for Americans). This was despite the fact that New Zealand is an island nation that is very far removed from international trouble spots. It was also despite the fact that international terrorism has historically posed only a tiny risk of death to the general public relative to that from smoking (which kills half of all smokers).

This reduction in calls is of concern considering that the Quitline (especially in the context of providing subsidised nicotine replacement therapy (NRT)) appears to be very successful in supporting quit attempts. Preliminary data from one survey suggests a point prevalence quit rate at three months of 44%.

Other explanations for this sudden and sustained reduction in calls to the Quitline from 12 September seem unlikely. Nevertheless, this decline in new callers did occur in the context of a longer term decline in calls to the Quitline which had been occurring since a peak in November 2000. That peak was a result of callers becoming eligible to obtain vouchers for heavily subsidised NRT through the Quitline service.

One implication of this relation between global security issues and Quitline calls is that publicity for Quitline services may be less cost effective at times of perceived international crisis. However, the continuance of at least 120 calls per day to the Quitline, during September and October, 2001, indicates the strength of the desire to quit in the population of smokers that the Quitline has tapped into.

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References

Big Mac index of cigarette affordability

As for any other commodity, demand for tobacco responds to price changes; when prices rise, demand for tobacco falls. Price increases encourage cessation, reduce average cigarette consumption among continuing smokers, and deter initiation. Tax increases are thus widely accepted as a key component of tobacco control policy.
In calling for increases in tobacco tax, tobacco control advocates often find it useful to compare cigarette prices internationally with those in their own country. To do this, they must somehow convert prices in other countries using a standard measure, most commonly the price in $US. Exchange rates, however, may be influenced by many factors including inflation differentials, monetary policy, balance of payments, and market expectations. Guindon et al proposes “purchasing power parity” (PPP) as a more appropriate measure for comparison. This theory argues that exchange rates are only at their “correct” levels when they are equal to the ratio of the two countries’ price level of a fixed basket of goods and services. Developing indices of PPP is a fairly time consuming exercise. The Economist’s Big Mac index, by contrast, provides a “quick and dirty” estimate of the extent to which various currencies may be under or over valued. McDonalds’ Big Mac hamburgers are produced to more or less the same recipe in 120 countries and can be regarded as identical for currency translation. The “Big Mac PPP” is defined as the exchange rate that would result in hamburgers costing the same in the USA as elsewhere.

While Big Mac prices may not perfectly represent a total basket of goods and services—meat prices for instance might vary in different markets—the Big Mac PPP does appear to compare favourably with other more rigorous estimates of purchasing power.

To produce an update of Scollo’s Big Mac index of cigarette affordability we obtained Big Mac and cigarette prices in 30 countries. Big Mac prices were obtained from The Economist magazine and through phone calls to a further 11 McDonalds restaurants worldwide (Dublin, Brugge, Amsterdam, Rome, Barcelona, Lisbon, Vienna, Stockholm, Helsinki, Athens, and Luxembourg, 28–31 May 2002). We used cigarette price and tax levels compiled by the Canadian NSRA and ASH UK and exchange rates as at 31 May 2002. We then divided the (local currency) price of a Big Mac in each country with the (local currency) price of a single cigarette (fig 1). Cigarette prices in $US and tax levels in 30 countries have been tabulated (table 1). The number of cigarettes per Big Mac provides a slightly different picture of relative affordability of cigarettes than that provided by a simple conversion to $US.

While by no means a perfect measure, the Big Mac index of cigarette affordability provides a reasonable estimation of relative affordability of cigarettes in the countries listed.

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References
In their editorial “It is time to abandon youth access tobacco programmes”, Ling et al. base their argument on an in press meta-analysis of youth access interventions by Fichtenberg and Glantz.1 These authors conclude that there is no proof that youth access interventions work to reduce youth smoking rates. Sadly, this analysis includes 10 methodological flaws11 which individually renders the conclusions scientifically invalid. One of the invalid figures from the Fichtenberg analysis has been reprinted in Tobacco Control.15

Three of the eight studies included in the meta-analysis did not involve any actual enforcement of the law, and the authors of a fourth study concluded that enforcement was inadequate because of a political backlash from merchants.16 The inclusion of at least three of these studies is scientifically unjustifiable as it has been established for over a decade that merchant education programmes alone are ineffective at attaining the levels of merchant compliance that can be expected to reduce youth access to tobacco.21 Three out of the five studies included in the analysis of the effects of youth access restrictions on past 30 day cigarette sales do not involve enforcement. The authors inappropriately list the Baggot study as included enforcement and fines when in fact the inspection method was so flawed that no merchant was ever caught and none were prosecuted.

In the Baggot study, merchant compliance is reported as 100%.23 None of the stores sold to youths aged 13 years or under during enforcement checks, yet 100% of smokers among the community youths surveyed reported that they regularly bought tobacco from stores and only rare subjects reported ever having been turned down. The study’s authors correctly concluded that the compliance inspections were an invalid measure of youth access. Yet Fichtenberg and Glantz included this invalid data in the analyses of a threshold effect and it is also included in the figure printed in Tobacco Control.11

It was improper to include a study from England where the legal age was 16 years as the majority of secondary school students would be of legal age to purchase and no impact on youths ages 14–15 would be expected.24 It was improper to include the study from Australia. In addition to the fact that the study involved no enforcement, 46% of the students in the intervention group actually lived outside the intervention area.25

The meta-analysis improperly combined studies of different designs including cohort, cross sectional, controlled interventions and non-controlled interventions. Combining these studies is also inappropriate because the effect of the youths, and the methods used to test compliance, differed dramatically from study to study. For example, a compliance rate of 82% for a 14 year old is equivalent to a compliance rate of 62% for a 17 year old.26 A compliance rate of 42% for behind the counter sales is equivalent to a compliance rate of 58% for self service sales.27 Differences in the techniques used to measure compliance rendered the comparison and conclusions in this paper invalid.

The authors’ basic premise is that the percentage change in merchant compliance should correlate with the percentage change in the prevalence of youth smoking. The use of this measure represents a straw man. In my review of 176 articles concerning youth access, I cannot recall anybody in this field ever suggesting that the change in percentage of merchant compliance is an appropriate measure of youth access. To the contrary, there is wide agreement among experts in this field that absolute levels of merchant compliance above 90%, as measured through realistic compliance checks using youths close to the legal limit, will be necessary to effect a change in the prevalence of youth smoking.28

In the figure presented in the Tobacco Control editorial, intervention communities are being inappropriately compared to control communities from other continents and legal systems. If the authors wanted to compare smoking rates and youth access interventions across communities, a random sample should be used, uniform measures should be employed, and other confounding factors such as socioeconomic status and the cost of tobacco should be controlled for. When this type of analysis has been performed on a community and state level of analysis, reductions in youth smoking have been observed.29

It has been known for centuries that the prevalence of smoking increases during adolescence. This factor must be controlled for in cohort studies by the inclusion of a matched control group. During the period when most of these studies were conducted there was a secular trend of dramatically rising teen smoking rates observed in English speaking countries. Since merchant compliance would also be expected to increase over time in these intervention studies, there would be a positive association between the intervention and smoking prevalence which would be seen in both cohort and cross sectional studies if enforcement were completely ineffective. The meta-analysis does not appropriately incorporate control communities for each intervention community. Only three control communities are included for 15 intervention communities across seven studies.

In the same analysis, the few control communities are inappropriately included as additional “data points” in the mix. Baseline data rather than outcomes data were used for one intervention community. These procedures indicate that the intention of this analysis was not to determine the impact of the interventions as the authors state.

The Fichtenberg and Glantz article1 is strongly reminiscent of the “scientific” papers secretly commissioned by the now defunct Tobacco Institute. It is sad that the scientific community continues to prop up political ends. The Tobacco Control editorial1 which was based on this travesty of science also excludes and misinterprets data which contradict the authors’ long held beliefs.12

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Authors' replies

Since DiFranza’s criticism of the editorial by Ling et al. concentrates mostly on criticism of the paper by Fichtenberg and Glantz, published in the 1999 issue of Pediatrics, we are writing in response to these criticisms separately. We recognise that this is unusual, since the standard procedure would have been for DiFranza to write to Pediatrics when the paper was published there. DiFranza, however, chose to write to Tobacco Control (based on a preprint we provided him as a courtesy), so we are responding here.

The premise of youth access programmes is that they will work because high merchant compliance leads to lower smoking, and there should be an association between high merchant compliance rates and low levels of youth smoking. The goal of our analysis was to see if, based on the available literature, there was a relation between merchant compliance and youth smoking. Whether or not the laws were being enforced at the time and, if so, in what manner, is irrelevant to this analysis. If youth access programmes work because high merchant compliance leads to lower smoking, as DiFranza suggests, then we should see high compliance and low smoking. If the intervention was not successful, because they did not include enforcement as DiFranza suggests, then we should see low compliance and low smoking. Both of these cases would contribute to our test of the hypothesis that increased merchant compliance was associated with reduced smoking. The data do not enable us to make such an association (fig 1A of Fichtenberg and Glantz4).

All youth access programmes measure merchant compliance through undercover sales attempts by underage youth, as was done in the Baggot5 study. If merchant compliance measured in this way is not an accurate reflection of youth access, then none of the studies of youth access that base their analysis entirely on merchant compliance rates would be associated with lower smoking rates. If youths who buy cigarettes are 16 years of age or older, they are considered legal buyers of cigarettes and, therefore, youth smoking. If youths who buy cigarettes are 16 years of age or older, they are considered legal buyers of cigarettes and, therefore, youth smoking. The age of the youths used in the compliance checks. DiFranza objected to our evaluation of the change in youth smoking prevalence as a function of change in merchant compliance on the grounds that it is unnecessary to obtain merchant compliance rates above 90% to have an effect on youth smoking prevalence. In addition to the fact that the data show no empirical evidence to support the hypothesis of such a threshold (fig 1A in Fichtenberg and Glantz5), our basic premise is that if youth access programmes actually reduced youth smoking, higher compliance rates would be associated with lower smoking rates. We examined this hypothesis in two ways. First, we compared compliance and smoking rates in all communities for which there was information. In a second, ecological analysis which does not take into account trends over time, we then examined the relation between changes in compliance and changes in smoking in case what mattered was whether there was a reduction in sales to youth rather than the absolute level of compliance at one time (fig 1B in Fichtenberg and Glantz5). The data presented in fig 1A show that there is no threshold of effectiveness at 90% compliance. Smoking rates for communities with compliance above 90% vary between 19.4–32.5%, with a mean of 25.9%. In communities with compliance rates below 90%, smoking rates vary between 15.6–37.7% with a mean of 25.7%. There is no evidence of a threshold of effectiveness.

Thus it is time for enthusiasts of youth access interventions to recognise that while these interventions may have seemed like a good idea, they do not achieve their goal of reducing youth smoking. All that happens is that youth obtain their cigarettes from other sources.6, 12

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Health messages on smoking and breastfeeding in maternity hospitals of Eastern Europe

Smoking, particularly antenatal smoking by the mother, has been consistently shown in many studies to be associated with increased risk for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).1 After the prone sleep position, smoking is the next most important modifiable risk factor for SIDS. Smoking not only undermines the health, development, and survival of the child, but of the mother and other family members, too. A survey of maternity hospitals in Eastern European countries was undertaken in 1999 to collect information on practices associated with increased risk of SIDS. We report here a comparison of smoking and breastfeeding practices of these hospitals.

The collaborative network of the World Health Organization in Eastern Europe (CCEE/UNICEF) identified country coordinators in 22 Eastern European countries and data were received from 489 hospitals in 20 countries. The study instrument, in either English or Russian, sought information on whether hospitals gave written information to parents and/or had a written policy on various practices including smoking and breastfeeding. Data entry and statistical analysis was undertaken with EpInfo software (Version 6.04c, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia, USA). There were more hospitals providing written information to parents about breastfeeding (72%) than about smoking effects (20%). Likewise, there were more hospitals with a written policy on breastfeeding (61%) than on smoking (12%). This difference was consistent across countries.

In contrast to the success of SIDS prevention campaigns advising babies should not sleep prone, it has been much more difficult to motivate parents not to smoke. UNICEF and WHO have launched the “The Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative” where hospitals are encouraged to adopt 10 evidenced based steps to promote breastfeeding. Of these steps is to have a written hospital breastfeeding policy. Our data may reflect the success of this initiative, in that 72% of maternity units had written information on breastfeeding available for parents and 61% had a written policy. In contrast, our data suggest that only 20% of units had written information available on smoking and only 12% of hospitals had a written policy (table 1). Given that maternal smoking undermines breastfeeding through increased risk of early weaning, reduced milk supply, reduced prolactin concentrations, and low fat concentrations in milk from smoking mothers, a tobacco strategy is likely to enhance breastfeeding outcomes as well as many other health benefits to babies. The “Tobacco Free Initiative” is one of WHO’s current priority programmes. Prevention of the birth of a child are important intervention points to encourage parents to stop or reduce smoking.

The well established and strong association between smoking and SIDS and the evidence of a dose effect of reduced risk with reduced smoking provide encouraging messages to help motivate parents to address their smoking before and after the birth of their infant.

Within maternity hospitals in Eastern Europe breastfeeding promotion messages appear to be more widely available than anti-smoking messages. Smoking prevention strategies should ensure that parents receive written information on the health risks of smoking and hospitals should have written policies. Consideration should be given to including evidenced based strategies to prevent and reduce smoking into an expanded Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative.

References


Table 1 Written information given to parents and written hospital policy on smoking and breastfeeding for 489 hospitals in 20 countries in Eastern Europe

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BH, Bosnia Herzegovina; FYR, Former Yugoslav Republic.
Filter vent blocking

In their recent article Kozlowski and O’Connor criticise a 1997 review on cigarette filter ventilation blocking and claim it is in error because it (1) relies on saliva based estimates, (2) does not consider degree of ventilation, (3) does not address brand-to-brand variation, and (4) omits certain tobacco industry documents. However, I think one additional reason why visits to the depository can still be helpful for researchers.

Kozlowski and O Connor state that “one notable omission” from our 1997 review is the 1982 study of a 1 mg “tar” cigarette smoke under various puffing conditions (allegation 4). In fact, data from that study are plotted in fig 8 of the 1997 review. We attribute the results to RP Ferris, the project leader, rather than T Hirji, the author of the memos, but it is the same study. They quote the smoke yields from the study but fail to notice that the data are the same as those in our review.

Likewise, Kozlowski and O Connor say that we ignored pertinent Swiss and Canadian data, but study summaries are included in our 1997 review. Our 2001 review quotes both studies and indicates a dependence of insertion depth on “tar” yield (that is, degree of ventilation). Kozlowski and O’Connor concentrate on the less detailed unpublished Swiss data but virtually ignore similar trends pointed out in the more comprehensive data published by Baker et al. The Swiss data were only partially blocked.

Kozlowski and O'Connor correctly state that we did not mention a 1977 study by Creighton. They quote from this report that “[n]one of the subjects was seen to cover the ventilation holes with clear adhesive tape”. They fail to mention, however, that the “subjects” in this study were R&D scientists evaluating two competitors’ filter ventilated cigarettes. Such an libidinous experimentation with the innovative (for 1977) filter design is exactly what one would expect of industry scientists. This experiment is irrelevant to the behaviour of consumers, and there is nothing more in the report about vent blocking. We considered this report of no relevance to our reviews.

Kozlowski and O’Connor state that we have “ignored the extensive machine smoking studies by BAT researchers and colleagues on Canadian cigarettes”. We cite this study and discuss smoking machine data at length. Rickert et al used only one ventilation blocking condition (50%) and the studies we chose to consider used multiple vent blocking conditions.

Finally, Kozlowski and O’Connor also refer to Philip Morris reports not covered in our reviews. In fact, we did know of their existence until recently. The topics of these memos are comprehensively covered by similar studies in our reviews, and adding nothing new.

Kozlowski and O’Connor lament the fact that they cannot find on the internet some industry studies used in our reviews. Not all tobacco companies are obliged to post their internal documents on the internet. Also, as they mention, the internet databases are constantly updated and some documents may not be posted at the time of a given search.

Kozlowski and O’Connor criticise our 1997 review because we did not refer to certain unpublished industry studies. Yet when we sent our updated review for publication in Psychopharmacology, the manuscript was rejected on the advice of a reviewer who said it was too dependent on unpublished industry studies (and whose comments read, coincidentally, very much like the Kozlowski and O’Connor article). It is therefore interesting that over 60% of Kozlowski’s and O’Connor’s references are unpublished industry documents. Many of these are short memos written for internal use, not complete re-search reports, and those not involved can lead to misleading conclusions, such as the discrepancy in attribution noted with Ferris and Hirji. It is very difficult to place these documents in proper context, and in some cases, to try to do so neatly 50 years after they were written.
unknown to us, in an industry sponsored journal. We learned of this publication a year after our paper was accepted for publication.

Lewis implies that we had reviewed an earlier submission of their paper to Psychopharmacology. We did review this draft, but were not privy to its fate. Journal rules and professional ethics require that the information in their submitted paper be treated as confidential, and we did not mention or make use of any of this confidential draft in our articles. That Lewis and Baker publish a revised paper that was informed by our thinking and suggestions on the topic should hardly be an occasion for criticising our discussion of a work that had not been informed by our advice.

Our paper appeared in a special journal issue dealing with available industry documents. Ideally, review articles should derive from published, peer reviewed research. Failing that, public availability (as on the internet) of the primary reports should be expected. But when industry scientists (here from RJ Reynolds and British American Tobacco) characterise internal reports—that may not be or ever become available on the web—the opportunity for independent evaluation of findings may be lacking. Presumably, industry scientists have the ability to bring primary source internal research to peer reviewed publication. For non-industry scientists, in contrast, industry documents on the web are likely all that is available. In other words, we are limited to discuss those findings that are open to public view, while they are in a position to characterise studies to which independent scientists have no access. It would be best if all studies used to support or refute findings were available to all interested parties, preferably through peer reviewed publication.

Figure 8 in their 1997 paper, which they attribute to Ferris, is related to data that we attribute to Hirji. Compared to the Hirji version, their fig 8 contains both more data (another blocking condition) and at the same time significantly less data (for example, no mention of results from a 75 ml puff in 1 second every 25 seconds, that produces from a nominal 1 mg total particulate matter (TPM) cigarette a TPM yield of 15 mg with no blocking and 23 mg TPM with a 50% block. The Hirji report mentions by name the individuals who did the work, and Ferris is not mentioned.

Lewis writes that Creighton used industry scientists (as was noted in the version we have) who could be expected to conduct “ad lib experimentation” with the then innovative filter design. One of these scientists/ad hoc experimenters dropped out of the study after a year because of “an unpleasant taste in the mouth, persistent irritation and lack of satisfaction” (page 5). Why Creighton did not report that he received testimony from his colleagues that abuses were happening, rather than having to “observe” or write that “one subject was seen to cover up the ventilation holes” with tape, is interesting.

Lewis engages us particularly on the issue of vent blocking—a theme we think is less important overall than taste and puff volume, and probably only important for less common heavily ventilated cigarettes. We never say the saliva based measures of blocking are worthless, just much less sensitive. In their recent paper, they go into some puff volume data, but for them, interestingly, the blocked vent results (smaller puffs, fewer puffs) are caused by under-puffing on blocked cigarettes rather than over-puffing on unblocked cigarettes. Their rhetoric encourages us to see a self protecting smoker, rather a compensating smoker. Nice try!

The data in their more recent paper also support the position that filter ventilation is a defective and dangerous design that contributes to the misleading nature of standardised testing of cigarettes.

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SOLUTION to the crossword on page 279

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  C O N T R O L L E C
  I T A A A S M A Y B E
  G R A N D P R I X P O S E S
  A I Y I N H A L E S
  R E A L O R N O T Y L P
  S C X Y E S N O O
  S T I F F E N E W H O
  D A I S Y M M L L
  E T S E C A D A V E R
  D A L L O W R E F
  I L D I L L I B E R A L
  C H A P M A N B A
  A M I D O O M S A Y E R
  T O B A C C O R T E A
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