Argentina: “non-smokers’ dictatorship”

On 2 October last year, just five days after Argentina signed the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), the magazine Veinti´ıres (“Twenty-three”) published a note on smoke-free environments. The main story of the magazine was illustrated on the front cover using the swastika under the title “The non-smokers’ dictatorship”.

Smoke-free environments are close to becoming a reality for Argentinians, not only as a result of the signing of the FCTC but also because of strong advocacy from the anti-tobacco movement and the government’s support for strong legislation. The story focused on the alleged persecution that smokers endure from the “crusaders” for tobacco control, especially the prohibition to smoke in closed environments. In addition, it included the opinion of well known individuals in Argentina, some arguing for and some against tobacco control. The story also provided examples of the alleged importance of tobacco in the history of show business and politics. Examples included Winston Churchill and Fidel Castro (nowadays, of course, an ex-smoker who lends his support to health campaigns). Statistics about the burden of tobacco and the commercial interests of the tobacco industry in Argentina were also included.

It was noteworthy that the author of the story, Raquel Roberti, failed to mention the deadly effects of second-hand smoke, or the benefits from smoke-free environments that include a decrease in heart disease mortality, smoking prevalence, and the number of cigarettes smoked. Also absent from the story was the previously documented programme on television together with the only person allowed to smoke on the studio set. Just as Veinti´ıres is promoted on television, the television programme itself is advertised in Veinti´ıres. The show’s large audience (about one million) includes many young people.

The author of the Veinti´ıres article smokes, but no relationship has been found between her or the magazine and the tobacco industry, except one tobacco advertisement in each of two issues in the past few months. In issues following publication of the article, the editor published some helpful letters from the public, sent in response to the pro-tobacco position of the original article. Perhaps the original motivation of the author and editor was to challenge the present tobacco control climate in Argentina, which is growing and enjoys the support of the country’s president, just as every week the television programme mentioned above challenges the bans on smoking in closed environments.

However, the Veinti´ıres article’s comparison of the smoke-free movement with the Nazis is a classic example of the favourite tobacco industry strategy of trying to position those who work for smoke-free environments as members of an extremist movement. Tobacco control activists around the world should be aware of this strategy, and be prepared to respond with the appropriate arguments.

USA: make health insurance include cessation help, says poll

Many tobacco control advocates around the world regard California as one of the world’s most successful pioneers in some aspects of tobacco control. It is easy to admire tobacco control programmes that may cost the equivalent of the entire health budget of many a small, less affluent country; and the US west coast super-state has also had its share of setbacks from recalcitrant politicians taking the easy way out to gain popularity with taxpayers. What really counts is the long term change in society’s attitudes to tobacco control, and whether people back progressive programmes to the extent that they are willing to pay for them. Recent research in California appears to have confirmed the state’s success in winning the battle for the hearts and minds, as well as the lungs, of its population.

A state wide survey by San Jose State University has shown that Californians with health insurance overwhelmingly support the inclusion of smoking cessation treatment in standard health insurance coverage. Seventy one per cent believed medications and programmes to help smokers quit should be part of standard health benefits, and 72% agreed that employers should offer employees insurance that includes coverage for stop-smoking benefits. Despite
News analysis

Evidence that shows stop-smoking medications and counselling programmes can double the success of smokers trying to quit, coverage for such comprehensive services varies widely among health insurance products. Yet smoking related medical costs account for almost 12% of all health care expenses in California, where the direct medical costs of smoking are more than $8.6 billion annually. Perhaps most interestingly, when asked whether they thought the cost of smoking was so great that it was worth paying a little more for health insurance to cover smoking cessation benefits, 61% agreed. In other words, a majority of insured Californians, including smokers and non-smokers, are willing to pay slightly higher health premiums to include stop-smoking medicines and programmes in standard health benefits. As Traci Verardo, executive director of the Next Generation California Tobacco Control Alliance put it: "Californians want to take the next step and give smokers access to resources to quit successfully. It is a real testament that even in this difficult healthcare marketplace, insured Californians—even non-smokers—are willing to make an additional investment to reduce the impact of smoking in our state."

Pakistan: weapons of mass deception

Pakistan Tobacco Company (PTC), local subsidiary of British American Tobacco (BAT), has been engaged in one of the most determined tobacco industry public relations blitzes ever seen in South Asia. Quite why it has mounted it now is unclear, though for some time the government has been making tobacco control noises, and BAT may have woken up to a nasty possibility. While it currently enjoys an almost totally free hand to convey exciting, glamorous messages for its lethal products to young people, things may change as younger patients, suffering life threatening diseases solely as a result of smoking in our state."

As in all the ads, the copy under the mobile dispensary picture ended, "PTC dared to dream, and has dared to achieve". It is true, of course: PTC/BAT has dared to be different, and has dared to dream that it could fend off the inevitable curbs on its activities as the majority seller of the country's leading cause of preventable death and disease. It has dared to spend a vast amount of its shareholders' money trying to portray itself as a benign rather than malignant presence in the country, and to try to make credulous politicians and other decision makers believe in its dreamland. In reality, it is at the centre of an epidemic nightmare from which the country urgently needs to awake.

USA: they were putting what, where?

In a surprisingly little noticed move, the US National Association of Attorneys General (NAAG) last year successfully requested that four major tobacco companies cease placing advertisements in the school editions of several news magazines. Magazines such as Time, Newsweek, and US News and World Report publish special editions for use in school classrooms, and these editions can be modified from those published for general distribution. Newsweek alone distributes over 300 000 copies to schools for use in school libraries and social studies classes.

The issue was brought to the attention of Vermont attorney general William Sorrell, who chairs NAAG's Tobacco Committee, by a group of eighth graders (aged 13–14 years) from Plainfield, Vermont, who found that 120 ads for tobacco products were placed in the magazines between January 2002 and June 2003. Phillip Morris, Brown & Williamson, US Tobacco, and RJ Reynolds agreed to remove the ads in response to a request from NAAG, which is responsible for enforcing the 1998 national tobacco settlement. A spokesman for RJ Reynolds claimed that the company was unaware that the ads were appearing in school editions of the magazines. However, as the attorneys general noted, magazine publishers commonly use a process called "selective binding" to place certain advertisements in some copies of their publications and not others. Tobacco companies have undoubtedly made use of this technique for targeted marketing purposes, as have numerous other advertisers.

Given the tobacco companies' past history of marketing to children, and their reputation for tightly orchestrated, highly controlled marketing efforts, this assertion of blithe unawareness of a basic ad targeting strategy strains credulity. In addition, the incident demonstrates an appalling lack of awareness on the part of major news magazines about the most basic and best publicised...
provisions of the Master Settlement Agreement—no marketing to children whatsoever, and specifically no tobacco advertisements in publications targeted at young people. Was this an oversight on a massive scale or another brick knocked out of the tobacco cartel’s youth marketing stonewall? We may never know; but it shows the importance of independent groups and individuals closely monitoring all aspects of any and every tobacco control regulation.

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Hungary: tobacco ads forced back inside

On 19 December 2000 the National Assembly of Hungary passed the amendment of the 1997 Act on Advertising, which introduced a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising. (Tobacco Control 2002;11:79–81). The ban was to take effect on 1 July 2001 for print media and 1 January 2002 for outdoor advertising, including posters, billboards, and other forms of advertisements. The law only allows “exhibition of tobacco products and their prices” at the point-of-sale (POS), advertising in industry publications and, on request, for global motor sport events, such as the Hungarian Formula 1 race.

Tobacco industry representatives, supported by interest groups of the advertising industry, expressed their disappointment and obtuseness around the law. Their first thought was to challenge the law in the Constitutional Court, because of the violation of commercial freedom of speech. While a law firm prepared the submission, the challenge was never initiated. Instead, tobacco companies started thinking about ways to evade the regulation in an attempt to remain as visible to the public as possible. A representative of an advertising agency even thought about behind-the-scenes agreements between the tobacco company and the publisher of the illegal ad, through which the company assumes the expected fine. In the end, neither of these tactics have been used. Tobacco companies chose to conclude a deal with the Self-regulation Advertising Board (an association with a membership of a wide range of “advertisers”, including all major transnational tobacco companies), and to develop their own interpretation of what POS meant.

The result was disappointing for tobacco control advocates and for those who were committed to controlling tobacco through administrative means. Again, tobacco advertisements became part of the scene on our streets. As it later turned out, the Consumer Protection Directorate (CPD), a government based agency responsible for enforcing the ban, received instruction from the Ministry of Economic Affairs to apply the tobacco industry’s interpretation of the law. As a consequence, CPD turned a blind eye to the everyday, illegal practice of the industry.

The Hungarian National Smoke-free Association (NSFA) decided to intervene. Without having information on the deal on which CPD enquiries about outdoor tobacco ads were based, it first collected information and reported to CPD illegal practices of which it became aware. It was only after its claims had been rejected by CPD that it made its next step.

First, NSFA asked the ombudsman’s office to take a stand on the issue. On 4 February 2003 the ombudsman took the position that tobacco advertising was not allowed in shop windows or shop fronts. Next, NSFA sued CPD for deeming legal a tobacco advertisement placed outside a bar in Budapest. In a precedent setting court case the Court of the Capital City ruled in favour of NSFA, outlining that in the context of the law, “point of sale” did not include anything visible from a public place.

According to this decision, promotional POS material for tobacco will have to be placed specially in retail outlets so it cannot be viewed from outside. Since the first case, the court has ruled in favour of NSFA on nine other occasions, and forced CPD to do what was intended by the law: to protect the public from the interests of a small but powerful lobby group.

The efforts of NSFA have already started to bear fruit. Shop owners, fearing fines and court cases, began removing tobacco ads from their shop fronts. While indirect tobacco advertisements—such as the ubiquitous Marlboro logo—are still to be seen, there is unquestionably a change in the public acceptance of tobacco advertisements.

However, the reasons for the apparent collusion between a government department (the Ministry of Economic Affairs), a government based agency (CPD), and tobacco company interests remains to be understood and revealed.

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Australia: sudden death in Sydney

Are tobacco control advocates a sentimentally inclined lot, prone to overlooking the fact that, as tobacco industry apologists never tire of pointing out, “We all die eventually”? Or is it perhaps a case of those able to do Big Tobacco’s dirty work being either a self selecting bunch of tough guys, or a group with a knack for denial about the medical consequences of their products, or both? Whatever accounts for the differences in the way the two sides view tobacco induced disease, an industry document that surfaced recently shed an interesting light on how a tobacco industry executive viewed a sudden death almost certainly aided by the free cigarettes that were routinely given to industry employees until comparatively recently.

In February 1972, almost exactly 10 years after the world’s first expert review of the scientific evidence about the effects of smoking on health was published by the Royal College of Physicians of London, which included some strong conclusions about smoking and sudden cardiovascular death, a series of tobacco industry meetings took place in Australia. An American executive identified only as Bill, possibly William Kloepfer from the US Tobacco Institute, wrote home to a colleague, “Dear Alex [almost certainly Alex Holtzman, general counsel to Philip Morris in the United States], Informal progress report. Damn good trip so far…” and went on to describe his first few days down under.

Describing a lunch at British Tobacco, he related how “Unfortunately, William Bengtsson whom I had just met and who was our host at[ ] luncheon collapsed and died at the luncheon table, and my attempts to resuscitate him were completely fruitless. It was quite sad, as he was much liked and highly competent.”

Quite sad? Is that all? Was it a form of manly understatement, or just a colloquial turn of phrase of the time, as in the English translation of the famous 19th century German book of terrifying cautionary tales for children, Struwwelpeter? In that, young Conrad, who ignored his mother’s instructions...
Women have been, and continue to be, the target of aggressive marketing by the tobacco industry.

It is depressing when we read of rising female smoking rates, and of the inevitable rise in female rates of smoking induced disease that follows later. But more than depressing, it is outright frustrating when we see evidence that, in some quarters, nothing appears to have been learned. Despite the painful lessons the industrialised countries of the west have been taught over more than half a century, tobacco manufacturers have not had to adjust their methods in any major degree. When they want to get previously non-smoking women to take up the habit, all they need to do is to promote it as a sign of emancipation. Just as US manufacturers did so successfully in the 1930s and 1940s, showing women doing what had previously been men’s work, such as being air raid wardens.

How do imbecilic mass media organisations, in countries whose governments and citizens are well aware of the problems, have to do the tobacco companies’ dirty work for them? Last November, the French magazine Courrier International carried a feature on female emancipation in the Muslim world, highlighted on the front cover by a photograph of a chador-wearing Muslim woman with a newly-lit cigarette in her mouth. Another picture, printed alongside the actual article, showed a different Muslim young woman smoking, in a pose obviously chosen to show a new sense of freedom among the subjects of the piece. This is exactly the sort of message big tobacco companies want to project. And the sickening thing is, we can be almost sure that in another few decades, publications like this will be boasting world
South Africa: PM at the door

Bad news from South Africa: as if the country did not have enough problems, it was reported in December that Philip Morris (PM), which at present only imports its cigarettes, has been exploring the possibility of manufacturing them there. PM’s rival, BAT, has more than 90% of the market and PM, which already has a strong presence though its brewing subsidiary, SAB Miller, has been using the argument that BAT is being protected in a near monopoly status, to try to force the kind of entry it wants. Japan Tobacco (JT), too, used similar arguments when it complained recently to the competition commission that BAT was restricting its retail sales, indicating JT’s own intentions to try to sell more cigarettes in the beleaguered country.

What really worries health advocates is not so much the reputation of PM as the most ruthless promoter of tobacco; after all, South Africa has the region’s leading tobacco control legislation. More worrying is that, according to newspaper reports, in making its bid to a government desperate for economically beneficial investment from overseas, PM is asking for some of the regulations, existing and proposed, to be weakened. For example, it has reportedly been trying to persuade the government to scrap a proposed amendment to the tobacco control law that would ban cigarette displays in shops, saying that such displays would be the only way it could make smokers aware of its brands. It does not seem to have addressed the logical response, namely that the brands are already on the market, so likewise, smokers must already be aware of them. Nor has PM refrained from telling the government that its proposed ban on shop displays, like its high import duties on imported tobacco products—another skittle it wants to knock down—will not help meet the country’s public health goals, only maintain BAT’s near monopoly.

The argument usually employed by companies trying to open up monopoly markets is that prices will fall, thus benefiting consumers. In this case, even if PM remembered to keep quiet about that one, it is to be hoped that the government realises that this likely outcome would most certainly be against the interests of its health policy. The inappropriateness of a tobacco company advising a government on what will or will not meet health goals does not seem to have struck PM’s top executives; but there again, it is unlikely they would be in their jobs if they were sensitive to...
such niceties. If they succeed, we can only wait and see how badly they manage to affect South Africa’s struggle to free its people from tobacco addiction.

Depressingly, newspaper reports covering PM’s latest African adventure have given no hint that this might be bad news for the country’s people, but only reported it as if it were just another item of business news. It is not always recognised that South Africa’s high levels of tobacco consumption, always ahead of other countries in the region, are mostly a byproduct of the bad old days of apartheid. South Africa needs to keep going forwards, not be dragged backwards by those whose intentions are highly exploitative, and could not be further opposed to those of health.

**UK: free bier for the workers**

As everyone knows, one of the few problems with smoke-free workplaces is the unsightly, messy groups of smoking employees they can spawn, hanging around the front door of otherwise smart buildings, giving a bad impression of the business inside. There was even a story from Australia some years ago, after government buildings went totally smoke-free and groups of smartly dressed young women employees began smoking on their doorsteps—foreign tourists reportedly commented on the high class appearance of women they assumed were prostitutes.

A novel approach to this problem was seen recently in Manchester, proudly described by its inhabitants as England’s second city, with a record of doing today what the rest of the country does tomorrow. It certainly clocked up another first when a go-ahead company boss, sick of people from nearby buildings smoking outside his offices, even sitting on the office window sills and leaving the usual debris of cigarette butts, empty packs and other litter, decided to erect a “facility” that might deter them.

After four years of politely asking the smoking workers of other employers to go elsewhere (his own have a special smoking room), company boss Nigel Sarbutts commissioned a special coffin shaped “smoking booth” and had it placed outside his offices. Mr Sarbutts’s company works in public relations and advertising. “We are in the image business. We have clients coming in,” he explained to journalists, adding, with a heartfelt multiplicity of meaning, “It just looks rubbish.”

**Sri Lanka: artist’s son hits at BAT**

In our last issue, we reported how CTC, local subsidiary of BAT, had been exploiting for public relations purposes a foundation named after one of the region’s most famous artists, George Keyt, who died in 1993 (see *Tobacco Control* 2003;12:345–6). We recently learned that Mr Keyt’s son, Sachin Keyt, has no illusions about the scale of BAT’s appropriation of his late father’s good name. We print below extracts from an interview that Sachin Keyt gave to a Sri Lankan journalist last year:

“Even when my father was living this foundation did not give him the due place. My father trusted them and after his death only I came to know that they had taken rights of my father’s paintings away. He was not a fool, but innocent and childlike. That’s the way of real creative artists... I am very displeased about the activities of this Foundation and the sponsors of this annual event, which is being held by...”
manipulating my father’s name. Cigarettes are harmful and sponsoring of an event of art by such people is a disgrace done to a great artist like my father…

“When my father was living, too, the manner in which they treated my father was not right. The Foundation had power to the extent to control my father. Soon after his death they just stopped the allowance due to my mother and she was very disappointed. After a couple of months she too passed away. When my father was alive they took away his entire valuable, old paintings, which he had dearly collected for years. They said they wanted to sell them for the maintenance of the Foundation. But what is the Foundation doing now? They are ruthless people. This is the truth, which I want to reveal to art lovers.”

CTC uses its sponsorship of the George Keyt Foundation to try to present itself as a socially responsible company. One of its recent public relations advertisements in national newspapers reproduced the name and logo of the foundation, along with an artist’s easel. Presumably it justifies the cost of such ads as a small price to pay to try to avoid effective tobacco control measures. It is nothing new for a tobacco company to profit from the dead.

**Brazil: BAT’s “smoking point” banned**

Anvisa, the agency responsible for monitoring and enforcing Brazil’s tobacco control legislation, recently ordered Souza Cruz, Brazilian subsidiary of BAT, to remove its “Smoking point” from the airport in Rio de Janeiro. The structure, erected by Souza Cruz and the airport management company, was a ventilated smokers’ stand in the otherwise smoke-free airport. Anvisa said it was not placed in an isolated area, and the technical analysis of the pilot project was inconclusive in terms of ventilation performance and filtration. While tests were being conducted, the public should not have been exposed to uncertain outcomes, Anvisa said, and Souza Cruz violated marketing regulations by displaying the company logo on the equipment, as well as using questionnaires there to get details for the company’s database.