Whose butt is it? tobacco industry research about smokers and cigarette butt waste

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ABSTRACT

Background Cigarette filters are made of non-biodegradable cellulose acetate. As much as 766,571 metric tons of butts wind up as litter worldwide per year. Numerous proposals have been made to prevent or mitigate cigarette butt pollution, but none has been effective; cigarette butts are consistently found to be the single most collected item in beach clean-ups and litter surveys.

Methods We searched the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library (http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu) and http://tobaccodocuments.org using a snowball strategy beginning with keywords (eg, ‘filter’, ‘biodegradable’, ‘butts’). Data from approximately 680 documents, dated 1959–2006, were analysed using an interpretive approach.

Results The tobacco industry has feared being held responsible for cigarette litter for more than 20 years. Their efforts to avoid this responsibility included developing biodegradable filters, creating anti-litter campaigns, and distributing portable and permanent ashtrays. They concluded that biodegradable filters would probably encourage littering and would not be marketable, and that smokers were defensive about discarding their tobacco butts and not amenable to anti-litter efforts.

Conclusions Tobacco control and environmental advocates should develop partnerships to compel the industry to take financial and practical responsibility for cigarette butt waste.

INTRODUCTION

The health consequences of tobacco use are well known: tobacco use causes many cancers, as well as heart disease, emphysema and many other illnesses.

If current trends continue, tobacco use will kill 1 billion people worldwide in the 21st century. In addition to direct health effects, tobacco growing and curing has environmental impacts resulting from deforestation and water contamination due to pesticide use. Other such harms are just beginning to be understood, and among these is the environmental damage that littered cigarette butt waste may cause.

The cigarette butt problem

Cigarette filters are a marketing tool, originally intended to keep loose tobacco out of the smoker’s mouth, not to protect the health of smokers. Indeed, filters have been implicated in increased rates of adenocarcinoma. Filters are made of cellulose acetate, which is photodegradable, but not biodegradable; they trap residues from smoking including arsenic, cadmium and toluene. In beach clean-up campaigns cigarette butts are consistently found to be the single most collected item. As many as 5.6 trillion cigarettes or 766,571 metric tons of butts are deposited into the environment worldwide every year. Whether they cause significant environmental damage is unknown, but municipalities and other entities incur substantial costs to clean them up. The city of San Francisco, California, USA, estimates this cost at $7.4 million annually.

Numerous proposals have been made to prevent or mitigate cigarette butt pollution, including labelling filters as non-biodegradable, deposit/return programmes, waste fees, litigation against the tobacco industry to recover clean-up costs, fines levied against consumers or tobacco companies, mandated filter biodegradability, a ban on filters and consumer education. To date, only consumer education has been used with any consistency, although San Francisco recently imposed a waste fee of $0.20 per pack to cigarettes sold within the city.

Littering behaviour

Why some individuals litter and others do not is not well understood, although it is thought that young adults litter more than other age groups. Littering behaviour can be affected by item type (eg, cigarette butt vs beverage container) and by location (eg, street vs park). Litterers may not recognise their own behaviour as littering, making it difficult to target. Most of the literature on littering dates from the 1970s and 1980s, and none deals specifically with cigarette butt waste. It is possible that changing smoking prevalence rates and social attitudes towards smoking have affected cigarette butt littering. The passage of clean indoor air laws may exacerbate the butt waste problem as more cigarettes are smoked outdoors; this hypothesis remains untested.

Nearly every aspect of smoking has been the subject of extensive research by the tobacco industry, frequently years or decades in advance of the published scientific literature. Industry research can help advocates design and implement effective tobacco control policy. Previous studies have shown that the industry has been concerned for decades that cigarette litter might increase the social unacceptability of smoking, inspire support for tobacco control, or result in legislation requiring them to take fiscal or practical responsibility for cigarette waste disposal. As a policy response, the industry has sponsored anti-littering groups, distributed portable ashtrays (frequently branded) and...
installed permanent ashtrays in downtown areas of numerous cities.24 None of these has solved the problem. This study seeks to illuminate some reasons for this failure by examining tobacco industry research relating to smokers’ littering beliefs and behaviours.

METHODS
Over 10 million tobacco industry internal documents have been released through litigation.25 We searched the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library (http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu) using a snowball strategy26 beginning with keywords (eg, ‘filter’, ‘biodegradable’, ‘butts’). Data from approximately 680 documents, dated 1959–2006, were analysed using an interpretive approach27–30 in which, ‘Each document (is) reviewed carefully and the ‘taken for granted’ assumptions and viewpoints of the author(s) drawn out’.31

Many of the documents referenced are focus groups or interviews the tobacco industry commissioned to better inform themselves of smokers’ feelings and opinions about cigarette butts and littering (details about focus groups are given in table 1). Focus groups are not intended to be representative and statistically generalisable; rather, they are used to gather impressions about the range of opinions on a given subject49; however, the fact that multiple focus groups reported similar ideas suggests that the focus group findings are not entirely anomalous. Most of these focus groups were performed in the late 1990s or early 21st century. Some were specifically designed to give the industry guidance about how to address the cigarette litter problem; in others, the issue was raised by smokers as one of the problems of smoking.

RESULTS
The industry’s consistent position has been that ‘the responsibility for proper disposal’ of cigarette waste belongs to the smoker.24 50–53 In hope of persuading them to take that responsibility, the tobacco companies studied smokers’ attitudes, beliefs and desires about cigarette butts in inquiries about smokers’ ideas for new products, specific studies about litter and tests of marketing material. Common themes emerging from these materials reveal the human element of the butt waste problem.

Smoker beliefs and behaviours
Beliefs about filters
Most smokers realised that filters were not biodegradable32; however, there were some smokers who did not.32 Some ‘rejected, or were unaware, of any environmental impact of butts’.54 (Some also believed that Camels in particular had ‘cotton, biodegradable’ filters55—a perception that continues today.56)

The potential toxicity of cigarette filters was noticeably absent from industry discussions of the problem, and smokers appeared oblivious to it. RJ Reynolds (RJR) held a number of ‘product ideation’ sessions with smokers,57 in which smokers suggested solutions to the butt litter problem, including creating edible filters, made of ‘mint candy’ or ‘crackers’.57 Other suggestions included using the filters as compost or mulch: ‘make it work with nature instead of against it’.58 One group discussed the idea of dissolving filters, but was concerned about possible harm to the water system.54 These focus groups were not designed to constrain ideas to the realistic or feasible; however, even the industry report noted that although smokers said they disliked ‘seeing butts in their own yards and in their own ashtrays’, they were not ‘worried about what butts do to the soil, landfills or rivers’.34

Smokers’ behaviour and attitudes about butts
RJR research found that ‘Most smokers say they hate to see cigarette litter’.34 They disliked seeing others empty ashtrays in parking lots or on the street.34 They also found butts repugnant when disposed of appropriately, commenting that an ashtray full of butts was ‘disgusting’,35 that they didn’t want to ‘clutter up’ ashtrays by using them for cigarettes,35 and preferred not to dispose of butts in their cars.56

Although a Philip Morris (PM) study found that ‘virtually all respondents’ felt that litter was a consequence of ‘apathy, laziness, and insensitivity’, they nonetheless ‘admitted that they do litter with cigarette butts’.32 Some studies quantified the number of smokers that littered: estimates ranged from 45%36 to 75%57 to 92% of smokers aged 21–25.37 Only slightly more than half of smokers surveyed in the UK had ever used a waste bin for their cigarette butts.37

Smokers gave various reasons for littering. Tossing a butt to the ground and stepping on it was felt by some to be a ‘natural extension of the defiant/rebellious smoking ritual’.52 By contrast, other smokers believed that it was ‘a conscientious thing to do’,52 since it eliminated the risk of fire. This logic was particularly prevalent in British studies; over half the respondents in one study,57 and over a quarter in another,54 mentioned fire risk as a reason for not putting butts in waste bins.56

Many smokers suggested that they were compelled to litter, asking, ‘What else am I going to do with them?’.34 Smokers said that they wished they didn’t ‘have to bury the butt in the bushes’,37 or ‘have to throw them on the ground’35 when no ashtray was available. Others similarly wished they ‘didn’t have to throw the cigarette butt out the window’ when driving (emphases added).53

Some who ‘felt guilty’ about smoking ‘were interested in unloading their cigarettes as quickly as possible’,52 and thus disinclined to seek out an ashtray. Similarly, some smokers did not like using ashtrays ‘because they can see how many cigarettes they have smoked’.58 But litter also contributed to guilt. One respondent commented, ‘an ash tray emptied in a parking lot... makes us all look like pigs’.34

Many smokers made a distinction between cigarette butts and other litter. Focus groups said that ‘flicking’ a cigarette was ‘so widespread’ it was ‘almost acceptable’, and smokers and non-smokers agreed that this ‘was a less flagrant litter violation than tossing a bottle/can’.32 56 Some smokers felt they had permission to litter, because cigarette butts were not ‘viewed as causing significant harm to the environment’.57

Butts and littering annoyed non-smokers.59 59 People associated ‘heaps of cigarette butts [eg, from dumping auto ashtrays] with a lack of concern for other people, selfishness and an almost personal assault’.40 59 Some believed that smokers frustrated by clean indoor air laws were deliberately littering in front of public buildings, to ‘send the establishment a message’,41 or that they littered out of spite.42 A PM executive acknowledged that, ‘Anecdotally, many non-smokers, and smokers, find [litter] the most offensive element of smoking’.60

Changing the product
The simplest way to solve the problem, some tobacco company employees suggested, would be to return to unfiltered
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Year &amp; Location</th>
<th>Topic/purpose</th>
<th>No. of groups/respondents</th>
<th>Demographics/methods</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philip Morris (PM)</td>
<td>1997 Boston, Massachusetts</td>
<td>Smoker and non-smoker attitudes/perceptions of litter in general, and a range of issues surrounding cigarette butt litter&lt;sup&gt;32&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Six groups</td>
<td>Four groups of smokers: two groups 21–34-year-olds (white collar/blue collar); two groups aged 35+ (white collar/blue collar). Two groups of non-smokers: one group of 21–34-year-olds; one group aged 35+; mix of white collar and blue collar.</td>
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<td>RJ Reynolds (RJR)</td>
<td>1992 Santa Fe, New Mexico</td>
<td>Consumer product idea generation&lt;sup&gt;33&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Two groups</td>
<td>Two groups of smokers: two groups 35+; mix of white collar and blue collar. Two groups of non-smokers: one group 35+; mix of white collar and blue collar.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Indianapolis, Indiana</td>
<td>Consumer product idea generation</td>
<td>Two groups</td>
<td>Two groups of smokers: two groups 35+; mix of white collar and blue collar. Two groups of non-smokers: one group 35+; mix of white collar and blue collar.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Boise, Idaho</td>
<td>Consumer product idea generation</td>
<td>Two groups</td>
<td>Two groups of smokers: two groups 35+; mix of white collar and blue collar. Two groups of non-smokers: one group 35+; mix of white collar and blue collar.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Providence, Rhode Island</td>
<td>Consumer product idea generation</td>
<td>Three groups</td>
<td>Two groups of smokers: two groups 35+; mix of white collar and blue collar. Two groups of non-smokers: one group 35+; mix of white collar and blue collar.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Dallas, Texas</td>
<td>Product idea generation</td>
<td>Two groups</td>
<td>Two groups of smokers: two groups 35+; mix of white collar and blue collar. Two groups of non-smokers: one group 35+; mix of white collar and blue collar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RJR</td>
<td>1993 Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Madison, Wisconsin; St Louis, Missouri</td>
<td>Development of a more environmentally-friendly cigarette&lt;sup&gt;34&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>12 triads and 2 focus groups per city</td>
<td>A cross-section of smokers that included men and women, high, middle and low education, high, middle and low income.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Idea generation</td>
<td>One group</td>
<td>A combination of managers and clerks from previous Dallas group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>1986 Six cities</td>
<td>Evaluate 26 novel product ideas&lt;sup&gt;35&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>693 interviews</td>
<td>Smokers recruited by mall intercept.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1995 Chicago, Illinois</td>
<td>Consumers' reactions to environmental issues&lt;sup&gt;36&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>148 self-administered questionnaires</td>
<td>Men and women smokers, aged 18–55 years old.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>1995 Owings Mills, Maryland</td>
<td>Consumers' reactions to environmental issues&lt;sup&gt;36&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>20 one-on-one interviews</td>
<td>Smokers, men and women, aged 18–55 years old.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tidy Britain Group</td>
<td>1996 UK (national)</td>
<td>Attitudes of smokers towards cigarette disposal outdoors&lt;sup&gt;37&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>918 interviews face-to-face on the street</td>
<td>A representative number of smokers in each of the categories of nation/region, age, sex and social class.</td>
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<tr>
<td>British American Tobacco (BAT)</td>
<td>1980 UK</td>
<td>To provide information on the likely social pressure, if any, against smoking; and what priority anti-smoking feeling had among other social concerns. To explore fully which components of smoking upset or annoy people and whether these differ between smokers and non-smokers.</td>
<td>Four groups</td>
<td>Smoking concerns in relation to other issues; meanings of and attributions towards smoking and smokers; responses to smoking in situational contexts; propensity of the anti-smoker to take action; and hypothesised pathological characteristics of the anti-smoker&lt;sup&gt;38&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>To provide an opportunity for the confrontation of smokers and non-smokers. To determine how smokers actually react to social pressure about smoking.&lt;sup&gt;38&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Four groups</td>
<td>Two groups of men, 20–40, four smokers, two ex-smokers, two never smokers. Two groups of women, 20–40, four smokers, two ex-smokers, two never smokers.</td>
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<td>RJR</td>
<td>1978 New York City, New York Cincinnati, Ohio San Francisco, California</td>
<td>The dimensions of consumers' views of the social and regulatory aspects of smoking&lt;sup&gt;39&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Six groups</td>
<td>All respondents were between 18 and 55 years of age. Men and women were equally represented in the groups held in New York and San Francisco, but in Cincinnati, one group was all men and the other was all women.</td>
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<tr>
<td>RJR</td>
<td>1985 Boston, Massachusetts Minneapolis, Minnesota San Francisco, California Los Angeles, California Atlanta, Georgia Dallas, Texas Kansas City, Missouri</td>
<td>Smoking concerns in relation to other issues; meanings of and attributions towards smoking and smokers; responses to smoking in situational contexts; propensity of the anti-smoker to take action; and hypothesised pathological characteristics of the anti-smoker&lt;sup&gt;38&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>89 group participants, 93 interviewees</td>
<td>Interviews in group and individual settings, administering written material and addressing parallel issues in both settings. Respondents were selected to ensure reasonable distributions of age, sex, socioeconomic status and smoking status.</td>
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<td>Company</td>
<td>Year</td>
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<td>RJR</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>West Coast USA</td>
<td>To meet the group and confirm that the newly formed company (Reynolds American) was committed to continuing the corporate social responsibility engagement and dialogue process 41</td>
<td>One group</td>
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<td>Seattle, Washington</td>
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<td>One group</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Southeast USA</td>
<td>To further the company's understanding of the actions expected of a responsible tobacco company 41</td>
<td>One group</td>
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<td>Bangor, Maine</td>
<td>Public perceptions of the tobacco industry 41</td>
<td>One group</td>
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<tr>
<td>RJR</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>West Coast USA</td>
<td>Tobacco control policy issues 41</td>
<td>One group</td>
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<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Seattle, Washington</td>
<td>Litter, ashtrays 45</td>
<td>Six groups</td>
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<td>RJR</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Birmingham, Alabama</td>
<td>To explore smokers’ reactions to concepts that build on social responsibility, to aid in the development of direct mail pieces 46</td>
<td>Six groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Atlanta, Georgia</td>
<td>The purpose of the social aspect of smoking focus groups was to generate some discussion on concepts for new cigarette ideas that address issues of social and health importance 47</td>
<td>10 groups</td>
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cigarettes. The suggestion was not acted upon; it was believed that it was ‘an easier sell to make [filters] biodegradable’ than to ‘convince people that “unfiltered” cigarettes will still be mild and smooth’. The industry saw several advantages to a biodegradable filter. It might stem the growing disapproval of smokers and of smoking, prepare the industry for future regulation requiring biodegradability, or even ‘pre-empt environmental legislation’—that is, make regulation appear unnecessary. A biodegradable filter might also improve a company’s image, countering ‘the negative publicity that the industry receives when litter surveys are published’. By contrast, promoting an ‘ecofriendly’ brand by implication raised questions about the degradability of other cigarettes. Tobacco companies were reluctant to disclose how poorly filters degraded. RJR frequently claimed that filters were degradable in 6 months or ‘less than a year’. The company disingenuously claimed that butts were not a litter problem because ‘practically all the materials we use have a degree of degradability’. The companies knew that biodegradable filters might actually encourage littering. British American Tobacco (BAT) suggested that such filters would offer ‘outdoor convenience’ by ‘eliminating’ litter. A focus group participant wanted biodegradable filters because ‘I want to just throw them down, but I don’t want to feel bad about it’. Brown & Williamson concluded that the ‘perceived benefit’ of a biodegradable filter was ‘the ability to litter without guilt’.

A related problem was that biodegradation was not instantaneous. A focus group report acknowledged that biodegradable filters ‘have all of the right buzz-words’, but ‘they may not degrade as quickly as smokers really want’. Smokers wanted a butt that disappeared. A BAT report concluded that ‘it is clear that a cigarette butt that miraculously vanishes, leaving behind it no distasteful sight or smell would represent a huge step forward for both smoker and non-smoker’. The question for the industry was whether anything less would satisfy the claim of biodegradability.

Finally, there was a tension between using biodegradable filter technology to benefit a particular company, and using it to improve the image (and self-image) of smokers. BAT was ‘looking for a market lead and therefore commercial secrecy’ about such technology, but the company also recognised that, ‘When all discarded filter tips look alike to the public the fact that some degrade more quickly than others may be of academic interest only, if the majority do not. For certain it is fanciful to expect gratuitous attribution of success from the public through elimination of only a small part of the problem’.

Changing smoker behaviour

Anti-litter campaigns

Several tobacco companies developed anti-litter campaigns, deciding that the solution was ‘education’ (not materials science). However, industry research suggested that such a campaign had to be formulated carefully. Smokers feared that an anti-litter campaign could become ‘another thing non-smokers can attack us for’. Thus, although most smokers admitted to littering, they felt defensive since butts were ‘just a small part of a big problem’. Even though the campaigns were supposed to make smokers aware that butts were litter, they could not single out smokers as litterers or equate smoking with littering. Smokers preferred slogans defining the problem ‘as a litter issue rather than a smoking issue’.

Smokers were sensitive to anything that could be interpreted as accusatory or critical, preferring a ‘gentle nudge’ to modify their behaviour. In Australia, smokers accepted a ‘Please bin your butts’ campaign, feeling that it was non-confrontational and acknowledged the right to smoke. However, in the US, although focus group members appreciated being reminded of their ‘rights’, they ‘did not want to be part of another cigarette controversy’.

In the US, smokers liked the slogan, ‘a little thought, a lot less litter’. (A version of this slogan, ‘A Little More Thought—Less Littered Butts!’ can be found on the Keep America Beautiful website.) The request for ‘more thought’ was ‘comfortable and acceptable’. In contrast, slogans suggesting that smokers ‘pick up’ their litter were rejected: although they might be persuaded to dispose appropriately of a butt they were holding, they were unlikely to pick one up once they dropped it.

The imagery accompanying such campaigns was also a matter of concern. Most significantly, images of cigarette butts—the focus of the effort—were ‘extremely uncomfortable for some smokers’ and thus to be avoided. Even the favoured slogan, ‘a little thought, a lot less litter’ was rejected when depicted with cigarette butts.

Portable ashtrays

Smokers were ambivalent about portable ashtrays. Some, ranging from 15% to 53%, and up to 61% of women, said they would find such an item useful. In one test, nearly 60% of those receiving sample ashtrays claimed they used them ‘at least 1–2 times a week’ and some said the ashtrays had ‘made them pay closer attention to cigarette disposal’. Smokers thought the ashtrays would be useful in places such as public parks, golf courses, ‘outside at work, outside the respondent’s home, outside others’ homes, and in the car’. They also said they would use the ashtrays to ‘convey a positive personal image around non-smokers’.

However, some smokers were ‘less enthusiastic’ because they didn’t ‘feel a need to use an ashtray to dispose of cigarettes outdoors’. Some claimed they smoked ‘only in places where there are ashtrays’, or disposed of butts in other ways. Other smokers felt they would ‘forget to use or carry’ it, especially because ‘the process of flicking a cigarette butt on the ground is a well-ingrained, reflexive habit’. Smokers also worried that the ashtrays would be smelly, ‘messy’, ‘dirty’ and called carrying butts around in them ‘revolting’. These smokers felt that ‘it would be easier to throw the cigarette on the ground’. In response to these concerns, RJR stressed that the ashtrays were a temporary means of disposal, to be emptied as soon as practicable.

Permanent ashtrays

Tobacco companies and smokers frequently suggested that the cigarette litter problem was the result of clean indoor air laws causing more smoking outdoors, where there were insufficient ashtrays. Studies noted that cigarette butt litter was often found ‘within 5 m of a bin’, and about half of smokers said they would not bother to use an ashtray if it were ‘more than 10 paces’ away; only
a third said they would walk further.95 Half of Australian smokers said that if they ‘knew it was a littering problem’ they would ‘make an effort’ to use an ashtray, and 20% said they would use a convenient ashtray, but wouldn’t go out of their way to use one.54 PM found that although 72% of smokers who noticed the ashtrays they had installed said they used them, only 20% noticed them.94

**DISCUSSION**

This study has limitations. The document set is not comprehensive, but a selection of litigation-related material. There has been no tobacco litigation to date concerning tobacco litter/waste issues, and there may be documents that contain additional information that could be revealed in the discovery process. We also may not have identified all relevant available documents due to the volume of the tobacco documents library.

The tobacco industry’s research shows how much smokers disliked cigarette butts, littered or in ashtrays. Smokers found them smelly and dirty; they were unwilling to put them in their car ashtrays, carry them around in portable ashtrays, or hold them for more than a few steps to discard them appropriately. Creating butt litter made smokers uncomfortable even as they did it. Furthermore, smokers had multiple, appropriately. Creating butt litter made smokers uncomfortable even as they did it. Moreover, smokers had multiple, sometimes conflicting, reasons for littering their butts: it was conscientious and rebellious, and it minimised their contact with an unpleasant reminder of their addiction. As the industry found, the complex psychology of butt littering makes producers and retailers responsible for recycling their products.95

Policy makers should be made aware that the presence of filters implies a degree of safety to smokers, but does not reduce smoking-caused disease, and that cigarette butt waste incurs a cost to communities and to the environment. Reconceptualising butt waste as an ‘upstream’ problem created by the tobacco industry may facilitate partnerships between environmental and tobacco control groups, leading to more innovative policy solutions that discourage smoking and place the cost and consequences of filter waste on the tobacco waste on the tobacco industry.

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**Competing interests**

ES was a consultant for the US Justice Department it its case against the tobacco industry.

**Contributors**

ES performed the research and initial draft of the paper; TN conceptualised the project and participated in the writing of the paper.

**Provenance and peer review**

Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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