

TOBACCO CONTROL

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Editorial

The stench of tobacco industry dirty linen

This issue of *Tobacco Control* contains four papers reporting revelations found in the 26 million page “haystack” of tobacco industry internal documents open to researchers and the public on the world wide web.¹ Anne Landman, who since August 1999 has daily posted document gems on the Smokescreen website,² summarises evidence on how the tobacco industry intimidates and retaliates against companies which introduce smokefree policies or otherwise seek to advance public health in ways the industry does not like.³ Connolly and colleagues describe how the tobacco industry has used chemicals to mask the smell of environmental tobacco smoke, adding yet further ingredients to the chemical cocktail that is the modern cigarette.⁴ Belinda O’Sullivan and I provide a chronology of the transnational companies’ ambitions to break into the stratospheric tobacco killing fields of the Chinese market,⁵ and Ruth Malone and Edith Balbach offer invaluable guidance to those new to document searching on traps for young players.⁶

In 1999, the National Institutes of Health in the USA requested applications from researchers wanting to research the documents. Four large grants have been awarded, with work commencing in July 2000. A second round of applications is now being assessed. This very welcome project will see a huge amount of scholarship on the documents, some of which will certainly find its way into *Tobacco Control*. Already one supplement is being planned. Since our first issue, the journal has given high priority to exposing tobacco industry mendacity and the often duplicitous public relations spin that supports it. In 1995 we instituted *Play it Again*, a section now edited by Gene Borio. Over the past five years, this section has featured many hundreds of embarrassing quotes from the industry, often made in forums where they thought no one would be taking note. Having the material available from the tobacco industry archives is like a prosecution team who has toiled with circumstantial evidence for 30 years suddenly being handed a library sized gory detailed confession from the accused.

There are some who are now arguing that the availability of the documents has changed for all time the terms on which the tobacco industry communicates with the public. Those of us who have spent most of our working lives refining retorts to industry claims that it is not interested in marketing to children, that nicotine is not addictive, that it believes the jury is still out on disease causation or that smoking bans in restaurants will force mass closures, now have reams of examples of the industry saying just the opposite. Rather than crafting commonsense and research based demolitions of these time honoured public positions, advocates need only turn to the subject ordered chronologies assembled by groups like ASH UK⁷ or Smokescreen⁸

and counter that whatever the industry is saying in public is contradicted by what it has said many times in private. The name of the game is no longer “Hey, that’s illogical or wrong!”, but “Hey, that’s not what you wrote in memo X!”. The dam burst of legal cases against the industry now being upheld by juries who have been given access to the documents shows that their revelations can blow devastating holes in industry defences. Under the blowtorch of courtroom cross examination, the documents are causing white hot heat for the industry and seem destined to keep on doing so in country after country as local advocates bring them to the attention of plaintiff lawyers and governments.

Yet no one should feel complacent that the documents mean the same old games are not being played by the industry in situations where it thinks it can still make hay. A 1994 Philip Morris pep talk records David Laufer, its director of marketing and sales, telling his troops: “. . . the economic arguments often used by the industry to scare off smoking ban activity were no longer working, if indeed they ever did. These arguments simply had no credibility with the public, which isn’t surprising when you consider our dire predictions in the past rarely came true.”⁹ Yet worldwide the company continues today to promote these baseless arguments through proxies such as restaurant associations.¹⁰ With many news outlets unprepared to investigate the credibility of such claims, Philip Morris presumably reasons that it may as well just keep on saying what it and anyone informed on the issues knows to be untrue. It seems that the tobacco industry could not lie straight in bed.

Those writing the next installments of tobacco control history will report the present era as the age of rehabilitated scoundrels parading themselves with the message: “we’ve changed . . . we’ve come clean . . . please now trust us to work with you to stop our future customers becoming early adopters.” Such assurances from convicted paedophiles would be unlikely to see them let loose as child minders in kindergartens, yet this is the equivalent of what the tobacco industry now asks governments.

Post the airing of truckloads of their internal dirty linen on their marketing ambitions with children, most major tobacco companies have gone into overdrive saying they really do not want children to smoke and organising education campaigns around the theme that smoking is an adult choice.^{11–13} Their newly legitimised interest in anti-smoking education gives them a pretext to conduct research openly with youth to try and answer questions like “how can we get youth to delay taking up smoking until one second after they turn 18 (or 21 in the USA)?”. David Simpson has previously commented on the insipid efforts in this regard by Brown and Williamson.¹⁴ Figure 1 shows



Figure 1 Lorillard's attempt to turn children away from smoking.

the Lorillard company's hard hitting, sincere attempt to turn children away from smoking. What, exactly, is the message here for a typical fun loving, risk taking teenager? Perhaps something like: "The good people at Lorillard warn you that if you are a teenager, smoking could blow your mind. Now . . . while that might be fun when you become an adult, we know that teenagers never aspire to be like adults. And, by the way, even though we are a business, we really do not want you to buy our products. Really." Philip Morris goes closest to giving the corporate wink to the whole sordid business: "We recognise that there is scepticism by some about our sincerity and commitment to youth smoking prevention. We accept that, and ask only that the public give us a chance, and judge us by our actions."¹⁵

In June, the damning report on the tobacco industry by the UK House of Commons Select Committee on Health provided a telling vignette of how the industry's new found frankness can sometimes amount to nothing more than a verbal three card trick. Discussing Martin Broughton, chief executive officer of British American Tobacco (BAT), the report notes:

Nicotine he described as having a "mild" pharmacological effect "on a par with caffeine". In its written memorandum BAT argued that "people say they are addicted to particular foods, using the internet, taking exercise, watching certain television programmes, or even to working".

We asked Mr Broughton to expand on why his company had included such comparisons. He told us that "What the

memorandum is trying to do is to say that we can get bogged down in semantics. There is a real danger that the current popular definition of addiction can be used for all sorts of things and not differentiate sufficiently between them. It does cover things like the internet. I think it is quite wrong to cover that . . .".

But in his opening remarks to us, Mr Broughton demonstrated exactly why precision is essential in discriminating between habits and pharmacological addiction: "Let us just accept for the sake of moving forward that the popular understanding today is that smoking is addictive. Nevertheless our customers are not fools nor helpless addicts . . .". In our view, Mr Broughton's statement here shows just how dangerous and misleading the semantic vagueness which he purportedly decries can be: having indicated his unhappiness with the vagueness of the term "addiction" he then glibly exploits it. His confident assertion that his customers are not "helpless addicts" only makes sense if the addictiveness of smoking "in the popular understanding", which he apparently accepts, excludes pharmacological dependence."¹⁶

Cooperation between the tobacco control community and the tobacco industry in any area other than harm reduction is based on the naïve premise that the tobacco industry will willingly and sincerely cooperate in serious efforts intended to reduce tobacco use. Harm reduction holds the promise of allowing the industry to develop nicotine delivery devices which might significantly reduce tobacco's toll while continuing to allow the industry to prosper. In that area, the door is open, although many remain sceptical. In all others, the industry's past and continuing conduct, as well as the quintessence of what the tobacco industry stands for, should keep the fox well out of the hen house. As Milton Friedman put it: "Few trends could so thoroughly undermine the very foundations of our free society as the acceptance by corporate officials of a social responsibility other than to make as much money for their shareholders as possible."¹⁷

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