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. Anne Landman, who since August 1999 has daily posted document gems on the Smokescreen website, 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. 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. 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, and Ruth Malone and Edith Balbach offer invaluable guidance to those new to document searching on traps for young players.

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 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. Figure 1 shows
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.”

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 cove 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 precise 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 addiciveness 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 naive 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

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

**SIMON CHAPMAN**

**EDITOR**

1. The Tobacco Archives. www.tobaccoarchive.com
8. Smokescreen. www.smokescreen.org/list/det.cfm
11. RJ Reynolds. Youth smoking. www.rjrt.com/TI/Pages/TIyouthsmoking_Cover.asp