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### Title

Changing Tobacco Control's policy on tobacco industry-funded research

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8sc58283>

### Journal

Tobacco Control, 22(1)

### ISSN

0964-4563

### Author

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### Publication Date

2013

### DOI

10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2012-050874

Peer reviewed

# Changing *Tobacco Control's* policy on tobacco industry-funded research

Ruth E Malone

For several years, the senior editors and editorial board of *Tobacco Control* have discussed changing our formal stance on the publication of research funded by the tobacco industry. It is simple enough to say, as most journals do, that regardless of funding source, well-done science should always be welcome at a journal if it passes peer review, and that full disclosure about funding sources provides adequate warning to reviewers and readers about potential research and/or reporting biases. There are good arguments to be made challenging disclosure as a method for insuring scientific transparency,<sup>1,2</sup> but the core of the issue is deeper than this: it involves whether there are systematic reasons to believe that publishing tobacco industry-funded research violates higher principles.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of the tobacco industry, there is abundant evidence (only a small sample is cited here) to show that this is the case, and to call for making a clear distinction based on funding source. First, of course, is the overwhelming evidence that tobacco companies have repeatedly and systematically interfered with legitimate scientific research, and repeatedly used industry-funded scientists and their industry-facilitated findings to deceive consumers and undermine public health.<sup>4-16</sup>

The issue is not merely that the tobacco companies produce research biased to favour their positions; they also use their scientists as key ambassadors in their corporate legitimacy-rebuilding work.<sup>17</sup> For example, re-establishing connections with reputable scientists was made an explicit part of Philip Morris's long-term plan to rebuild its public reputation and renormalise the tobacco business.<sup>18</sup> Thus, when peer-reviewed health journals publish industry-funded work, they are putting their journals in service to tobacco industry public relations goals.

Second, *Tobacco Control*, as a journal, has always had a normative stance: its very title speaks to its purpose.<sup>5</sup> *Tobacco Control* does not exist merely to publish research about tobacco in general, but to advance the field of tobacco control through publishing well-done science, scholarly discourse and advocacy pieces. The editors take as givens that tobacco products are bad for health, that we face a global, industrially produced disease epidemic from tobacco industry products, and that tobacco companies' primary aim (even, as some point out,<sup>19</sup> their legal obligation to shareholders) is to increase profits through multiple means, including encouraging tobacco consumption and minimising or discouraging tobacco cessation. One might argue that this implies that we editors are, therefore, no less biased than tobacco companies when it comes to research. However, while we are always happy to publish studies that advance tobacco control by showing that policies and programmes work to reduce tobacco use or change its social meaning, we are equally happy to publish studies showing when they do not work, when they are not cost effective, or when they create new, unanticipated problems. We do not reject well-done studies simply because we do not agree with their findings, or those findings call into question current practises; in fact, the field as a whole often benefits from challenges to common assumptions, which can open new areas of research.

Third, most reputable journals and scientists respect the notion that the point of inquiry is to widely disseminate and refine knowledge—in the case of health-related journals, knowledge that will ultimately benefit health. Presently, staggering numbers of publications based on tobacco company internal documents show that the tobacco industry, by contrast, uses its funding of research and researchers to suppress, delay and thwart dissemination of knowledge and to create confusion.<sup>20-26</sup> This behaviour reflects the industry's overriding concern for profits, which trumps even the most basic ethical obligations of any society—truth telling and minimising harm among them. It is

for these reasons that countries which are parties to the World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control have agreed that 'there is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the tobacco industry's interests and public health policy interests'.<sup>27</sup>

Quality academic publishing depends upon a foundation of trust and a shared mission between authors and editors. Nevertheless, neither of these is possible with the tobacco industry, which shares neither the mission of promoting transparency in science, nor that of achieving tobacco control, and has amply demonstrated its untrustworthiness. Only research that tobacco companies think likely to advance tobacco industry goals (and profits) will be allowed to be submitted for publication, creating a presubmission bias.

For all these reasons, *Tobacco Control* will no longer consider papers reporting work funded, in whole or in part, by a tobacco company or tobacco industry organisation. Furthermore, we will not consider papers by authors who accept tobacco industry funding.

We cannot claim to be path-breaking in making this decision; in fact, we are rather late to the party. Other reputable journals have already been doing this (in some cases, for years) and we owe them a debt of gratitude for their leadership. Since 1995, for instance, journals published by the American Thoracic Society have had an explicit policy against publishing research funded by the tobacco industry.<sup>3,28</sup> *Journal of Health Psychology* has long had a similar policy.<sup>29</sup> In 2010, *PLoS Medicine* announced its policy, joining *PLoS One* and *PLoS Biology*.<sup>30</sup> There are likely to be others, and we hope that other journals will join us.

More recently, the United States National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), a major National Institutes of Health research funder, released a guidance document of points to consider regarding applications from grantees who also accept tobacco industry funding.<sup>31</sup> Citing the decision in *U.S. Department of Justice vs. Philip Morris et al.*, the massive federal lawsuit in which the major tobacco companies were found to have engaged in fraud and racketeering (findings recently reaffirmed on appeal), the document notes that tobacco industry-funded research has been shown to be biased in favour of industry goals. Further, the document notes that 'the interests of the tobacco industry are fundamentally incompatible with the scientific goals and public health mission of NIDA'. For these reasons, NIDA (while not

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prohibiting outright the funding of researchers also supported by industry) counsels great caution in considering such applications. Several universities and private research funders have adopted policies against acceptance of tobacco industry research funding for similar reasons.<sup>32 33</sup>

As noted in a previous editorial by the then editor Simon Chapman in 2005,<sup>34</sup> *Tobacco Control* very rarely receives industry-funded research papers, as the industry has many favoured journals where it can publish. However, the discussion was reopened recently by a direct query to the editor, which followed close upon the heels of a flurry of several rejected submissions of work from Chinese tobacco industry scientists. One of these submissions claimed that 'science has not to date been able to identify biological mechanisms which can explain with certainty the statistical findings linking smoking and certain diseases', citing the website of British American Tobacco as a source for this astonishing assertion.

In fairness to the journal's earlier editors, tobacco company scientific malfeasance was only suspected, but not fully known, until after the release of millions of pages of tobacco industry documents. But, given the massive body of research and scholarship that has since used the documents to demonstrate industry patterns and practises so extensively, we would be remiss now to ignore its implications for editors of a professional journal focused on health.

As its editors, we will not allow *Tobacco Control* to be put into the service of advancing tobacco industry goals. We recognise that we may, in implementing this policy, miss opportunities to publish industry-funded studies on the pending crop of so-called 'potential reduced exposure products', or even products that could potentially be less harmful than those now on the market. However, we see no evidence whatsoever that tobacco companies plan to phase out the single most deadly consumer product ever made and the source of the bulk of their profits: the cigarette. Once cigarettes are pulled from the market, as a Philip Morris chief executive once swore they would be should they be found to cause disease,<sup>35 36</sup> then we can revisit our decision. Meanwhile, we are pleased to join with many other reputable journals and funders in formally refusing to consider tobacco industry-funded work.

**Acknowledgements** Thanks to the *Tobacco Control* editorial board for vigorous discussion of the issues at stake, and especially senior editors Andrew Hyland, Joaquin Barnoya, Joanna Cohen, Coral Gartner, Sally Haw, Lisa Henriksen, and to Simon Chapman, Lisa Bero,

Patricia McDaniel, Elizabeth Smith, Naphtali Offen and Valerie Yerger for comments on this editorial.

**Funding** None.

**Competing interests** None.

**Provenance and peer review** Commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

*Tobacco Control* 2013;**22**:1–2.  
doi:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2012-050874

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*Tob Control* 2013 22: 1-2

doi: 10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2012-050874

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