

Why the European Journal of Public Health will no longer publish tobacco industry-supported research

Martin McKee¹, Peter Allebeck²

¹ Member, Editorial Board and Former Editor-in-Chief, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK

² Editor-in-Chief, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden

Correspondence: Martin McKee, LSHTM, 15-17 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SH, UK. Tel: +44 20 7927 2229; e-mail: Martin.McKee@lshtm.ac.uk

The European Journal of Public Health will no longer consider for publication any study that is partly or wholly funded by the tobacco industry. In doing so, it falls into line with the long-standing policy of journals such as Tobacco Control, PLoS Medicine, PLoS One, PLoS Biology and the Journal of Health Psychology, joined in October 2013 by the BMJ, Heart, Thorax and BMJ Open.¹

In reaching this decision, we are fully aware of the arguments that, as long as there is full disclosure of conflicts of interest, readers can decide for themselves about how to interpret the findings in published papers. Moreover, the peer review process should remove those papers that are seriously flawed or fraudulent. Yet we know from experience that this view is naïve. Evidence from the tobacco industry's internal documents reveals how it has used research to mislead, in particular by seeking to create doubt and confusion about the harm of its products.

In this Journal, we have first-hand experience of this. Some years ago, we published a paper on the dietary habits of women living with smoking and non-smoking partners.² Taken on its own, it seemed a reasonable paper, showing that the two groups differed, although in different ways in the two countries studied and to a fairly minor degree. But what we did not realize was that this paper was never intended to be taken on its own. It was one of a number of so-called 'confounder' or 'spoiler' studies funded by the tobacco industry, designed to undermine the research showing that women living with smoking partners had a higher rate of lung cancer than those who did not. As previously described, this was part of a major operation conducted to spread doubt about the evidence on the health-damaging effects of passive smoking.³ This was a high priority for the tobacco industry at that time, as it was facing calls to ban smoking in public places. The strategy involved work in a secret testing plant in Germany, directed through a complex and secretive web of communication, to find ways to conduct animal experiments in such a way that they would not find the known effects of second-hand smoke. The industry commissioned independent scientists to carry these experiments out, knowing the results they would obtain. It also included selective publication of research. But above all, it set out to confuse. As one memo 'for internal use only' revealed, the author of the study we published 'did not feel that the workshop could or would be in a position to give environmental tobacco smoke a "clean bill of health."' However, [he] did believe that he could bring a healthy scepticism to the

conference and some of the claims being made about environmental tobacco smoke'.⁴

We are not alone. The BMJ has also experienced the limitations of existing systems of disclosure, when it published a paper suggesting that passive smoking was not damaging to health.⁵ Once again, the real story was in the industry's documents and, when published, catalogued in great detail the tactics pursued by the industry out of the public gaze.⁶

Our decision is timely. It is now clear that the tobacco industry is beginning to recover from the many setbacks it has experienced at the hands of the tobacco control community. It achieved considerable success with its vast lobbying activities in watering down the text of the draft EU Tobacco Products Directive when it was voted on in the European Parliament. Moreover, the industry is now seeking to reposition itself as a protector of health, using its rapidly growing presence in the e-cigarette market to undermine tobacco control.⁷

As the authors of the BMJ and the other journals noted,¹ 'it is time to cease supporting the now discredited notion that tobacco industry funded research is just like any other research. Refusing to publish research funded by the tobacco industry affirms our fundamental commitment not to allow our journals to be used in the service of an industry that continues to perpetuate the most deadly disease epidemic of our times'. We fully agree.

References

- Godlee F, Malone R, Timmis A, et al. Journal policy on research funded by the tobacco industry. *BMJ* 2013;347:f5193.
- Rylander R, Axelsson G, Mégevand Y, et al. Dietary habits for non-smoking females living with smokers or non-smokers. *Eur J Public Health* 1999;9:142–5.
- Diethelm PA, Riehl J-C, McKee M. The whole truth and nothing but the truth? The research that Philip Morris did not want you to see. *Lancet* 2005;366:86–92.
- Hoel D, Shook, Hardy & Bacon. Environmental tobacco smoke effects on the nonsmoker—II. 31 August 1981. Brown & Williamson. Bates No 680542958/2962.
- Enstrom JE, Kabat GC. Environmental tobacco smoke and tobacco related mortality in a prospective study of Californians, 1960–98. *BMJ* 2003;326:1057.
- Bero L, Glantz S, Hong H. The limits of competing interest disclosure. *Tob Control* 2005;14:118–26.
- de Andrade M, Hastings G, Angus K. Promotion of electronic cigarettes: tobacco marketing reinvented? *BMJ* 2013;347:f7473.