

# TOBACCO CONTROL

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## Editorial

### The ethics of the cash register: taking tobacco research dollars

- A dictator plunders billions from his nation's treasury. Soon for exile, he offers some ill-gotten millions to one of his land's universities, insisting that it fund a new school of social welfare studies that will bear his name.
- For years, an oil baron has traded petroleum products for weapons, fuelling a lengthy, futile regional conflict. Sensitive to international criticism, he promises a few million pounds to a prestigious European university, to create a chair in "peace studies".
- A pornographer makes millions from films employing, on miserable wages, illiterate men and women from slums and villages of Asian nations. Now the subject of international vilification in the western media, he offers a fraction of his riches to his alma mater. The caveat? The money must establish a chair in erotic literature.
- An unrepentant Nazi officer amassed fabulous wealth by selling possessions of concentration camp victims. Grateful to the country that provided him refuge from judgment at Nuremberg, he expresses appreciation on his death bed by donating his fortune to the nation's leading school, insisting that it be used to teach "a critical history of the Holocaust".
- A leading tobacco company controls over 15% of the global market,<sup>1</sup> making it responsible, annually, for more than 600 000 deaths worldwide.<sup>2</sup> The company promises millions of pounds to create an International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility, where students may learn of the "social and environmental responsibilities of multinational companies".<sup>3</sup>

The above suggestions are in lurid, poor taste. Surely, no academic institution would risk international opprobrium by accepting such a scheme? Yet, that is precisely what has happened this past December.

For the sobering sum of £3.8 million (around \$5.7 million), British American Tobacco (BAT) announced that it would fund an International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility at Britain's Nottingham University. As one television reporter succinctly asked: "Ever heard the joke about the cigarette salesman and social responsibility? Well, it turns out this is no cheap gag."<sup>4</sup>

Two things should immediately be clear here: first, a university not hungry for money is a fiction; second, there are few universities that would not draw a line *somewhere* about the appropriateness of taking money from disreputable sources. Apparently, Nottingham University is one of the unhappy few that would seem to have no such qualms.

BAT's gift comes at a time when the company is being investigated by the UK Department of Trade and Industry over allegations of involvement in international tobacco smuggling<sup>5</sup> and in the still-churning wake of revelations concerning what is, undeniably, the world's largest, longest

running, and most mendacious consumer fraud ever perpetrated.<sup>6-8</sup>

We wrote to Nottingham's vice chancellor Sir Colin Campbell (colin.campbell@nottingham.ac.uk), asking him if he would also be willing to accept money for university purposes from the above interest groups. No reply was received.

Like the tobacco industry, our list of benefactors above are all either purveyors of perfectly "legal products" or people who have mostly escaped prosecution for their reviled conduct. Like the barons of the tobacco industry, the world's disgraced dictators, arms dealers, war criminals, and pornographers display pathological disregard for their victims. But, unlike the tobacco industry, our cast has mostly spared the world's universities a goring on the horns of such funding dilemmas. The tobacco industry, however, has hung about university research funding corridors like a wheel of ripe cheese in a sunbaked phone booth, provoking strenuous protest, particularly in universities in the USA,<sup>9</sup> Canada,<sup>10</sup> the UK,<sup>11</sup> Australia,<sup>12</sup> Israel,<sup>13</sup> and South Africa.<sup>14</sup>

Academic institutions must adhere to certain core principles. Among the highest is a commitment to open scientific enquiry. The tobacco industry is institutionally allergic to this central tenet, preferring to bury incriminating data and to obfuscate emerging truths about the toxicity of its products. The story of how Philip Morris treated the work of its own scientists, particularly Victor DeNoble and Paul C Mele,<sup>15</sup> is staggering proof of the industry's incompatibility for partnership with universities.

For decades, the tobacco industry's seductive international programme of research benefaction masqueraded behind the legitimising language of independence, dispassionate enquiry, and respect for scholarship. But, as revealed in the avalanche of internal industry documents now available on the world wide web, the industry was peerless in its proclivity for cultivating venal or naive scientists into a massively funded public relations campaign. The sole purpose of the exercise was to sow doubt among the public.<sup>16 17</sup>

Tobacco industry grant recipients often unwittingly reinforced the industry argument that it was genuinely seeking to define more precisely the relation between smoking and illness. "If only we could do this, we might then be prepared to agree that our tobacco kills and is addictive", their rhetoric pleaded in the days before it publicly agreed that the "C" and "A" words (causes cancer and addiction) properly applied to their products. Such collusion was utterly naive and served to perpetuate the industry's intent—that the issue of smoking and disease needed to be seen as wide open, therefore allowing the

industry to remain blameless and unfettered in promoting its products.

But what can we make of the Nottingham case? We can imagine titles of seminar programmes: “Deceiving your customers: is it *always* wrong?”; “Early death as moral virtue: a communitarian view”; “Burying discomfiting research: don’t publish and don’t perish”; “When good science goes bad”. Fact is, the truth would be stranger than fiction. Tobacco ethics is a grotesque oxymoron and has all the ethical weight of a cash register. John Toy, the Imperial Cancer Research Fund’s medical director, put it simply and eloquently: “If you accept money from the tobacco industry you are partly in cahoots with them. For me, it’s a simple division of black and white. I think it’s a great shame that Nottingham University has agreed to accept this money.”<sup>18</sup> A chair in corporate responsibility, funded by tobacco money, can only collapse under the weight of its own shame.

Taking tobacco dollars tends to induce timidity among scholars who might otherwise trumpet the implications of their research in policy forums: why bite the hand that feeds so well? Tobacco funded scientists seldom, if ever, promote their findings in arenas that might influence health policy or publicly criticise the tobacco industry. Indeed, there are several examples of funded scientists actively doing the industry’s bidding in policy areas that threaten the tobacco cartel’s future.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, many tobacco research questions can only be fully elucidated by medical research. Tobacco money has enabled some to remain employed, with undeniable benefits to colleagues and dependents. But the worthiness of research and the desirability of employment ought not to be evaluated apart from the means by which they are achieved and the wider agenda behind the industry’s benefaction. Tobacco grant money derives directly from the sale of tobacco. Researchers with industry grants benefit directly from the sale of tobacco products, suffering the attendant ethical considerations about ghoulishly profiting from industry induced death and disease.

A common rejoinder to this argues that there is no such thing as clean money. Isn’t anyone in a government’s employ getting a salary that derives partly from tobacco excise receipts? But, here, one might as well argue that an automobile driver is in the same position because the state pays for roads: by this argument, no one can avoid “benefiting” from smoking. Those who might not want to profit from tobacco money in such indirect ways are still, in effect, compelled to do so. The governmental practice of placing all forms of tax and excise into consolidated revenue, rather than hypothecation in the manner of, say, petrol tax for road programmes, prevents individuals exercising such choice. But, in the case of tobacco research grants, recipients actively choose to obtain the money and so should be prepared to defend their decisions.

Industry funded scientists have employed crude rationalisation to defend themselves: “there is money on the table, and someone is going to pick it up, so it might as well be us”. Another tendentious argument claims that researchers have a moral duty to apply their knowledge and skills, striking a balance between the implications of accepting the money and a neglect of important health and medical research. This would elicit sympathy if it were true that other funding sources were simply unavailable. The present state of non-industry sponsored research into tobacco and health shows this is not the case.

It is difficult to imagine a more calculated cynical gesture than the Nottingham incident. The tobacco industry’s sponsorship of sports, fashion, and motor racing, and its funding of schools, youth groups, and hospitals, all

merit condemnation. But, even by industry standards, the marriage of tobacco and university ethics would make more than just the bride blush.

While defending the Nottingham deal, John Carlisle, of the Tobacco Manufacturers Association, was asked directly, “Do you accept that this [tobacco use] is a threat to health and that you’re killing people?” His reply? “I accept that this is a controversial product . . . We would expect, obviously, some hard discussion would go on within that university as elsewhere.”<sup>19</sup> Carlisle’s non-answer neatly encapsulates the reasons for categorical rejection of the industry’s “blood money”.<sup>18</sup>

In announcing the Nottingham donation, Michael Prideaux, corporate affairs director for BAT, said, “We are very serious about demonstrating responsible behaviour in an industry seen as controversial.”<sup>20</sup> But, if BAT cannot admit that its products are lethal, then it is the antithesis of a responsible corporation. How, then, can it help Nottingham University answer subtle questions about ethical business practice?

BAT can provide the funds, but it cannot deliver the truth. Nottingham can take the money, but it cannot run from the truth.

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