

Health Minister met with British-American Tobacco reps, lobbyists

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Ya'acov Litzman. (photo credit: MARC ISRAEL SELLEM/THE JERUSALEM POST)

Pressed by the Movement for Freedom of Information to disclose his daily appointment schedule, the Health Ministry has released – six months late – details of what Health Minister Ya'acov Litzman did in 2015 and 2016.

According to appointment logs, in addition to attending Knesset plenum sessions and committee meetings and speaking to senior ministry officials, the minister spent significant time going to circumcisions, bar mitzva and wedding celebrations and funerals of people connected to his Gur Hassidic community and other ultra-Orthodox (haredi) constituents.

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Unknown until now, however, was that he met with representatives of British-American Tobacco in addition to lobbyists from tobacco giant Philip Morris. The latter had been publicized by Channel 2 in an investigation of the minister's dealings with the industry.

According to the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control ratified by Israel 12 years ago, health ministers and other senior government officials are not supposed to meet with tobacco lobbyists, and if they do they are bound to make such meetings public – Litzman failed to do so.

Another entry was a meeting with the head of the McDonald's fast food chain a week before he declared "war"

on the company's alleged "fatty and unhealthy" meals.

Torah discussions with Finance Ministry director-general Shai Babad were also held during the period.

Last week, Litzman told reporters at the first session of the Health Basket Committee he was reluctant to reveal his appointments because "I spend most of my time meeting with patients who have problems. I don't want personal information to leak out." Such personal data was redacted.

The Movement for Freedom of Information, working under the aegis of the Freedom of Information Act, had demanded that ministers provide their appointment lists and while most have done so, others have balked.

"Israeli ministers have failed to internalize their obligation to the public... to report to them on what they do," said Nirit Blair, a lawyer and director of the nonpolitical, nonprofit organization. "There is no reason why revelation of the health minister's appointments had to be demanded rather than initiated by the minister and why we had to wait for it for six months."

Blair added that it was a "simple task" for ministers to provide such information on an ongoing basis, leaving out identifying details required by privacy. Publicizing meetings by ministers allows the public to observe their functioning and the way they work, and every list that is revealed gives the public more power in the field of democracy."

The ministry did not comment on why the release was delayed for so long.