

Tobacco control: a Foundation too far?

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Tobacco smoking is the leading cause of preventable mortality worldwide and is responsible for more than 7 million deaths each year. In today's issue of *The Lancet*, we publish a Viewpoint describing the mission and goals of the recently established Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, funded by tobacco giant Philip Morris International. Led by former WHO executive director Derek Yach, the Foundation, whose aim is “to eliminate cigarette smoking worldwide”, will receive US\$1 billion in funding over the next 12 years.

Yach, who was instrumental in the development of WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, argues in his Viewpoint that a harm-reduction approach is the most effective way to reduce tobacco-related deaths. The Foundation's primary aim is to support smokers to switch to reduced risk products, such as e-cigarettes. A second aim is to transition tobacco farmers in low-income and middle-income countries towards alternative crops and livelihoods. Yach contends that Philip Morris will have no influence over the Foundation's work, and he is seeking external input on how to ensure its governance, strategy, and activities are truly independent.

The launch of the Foundation, initially announced on Sept 13, has been condemned by medical societies, public health campaigners, and tobacco control advocates. Critics are sceptical of the tobacco multinational's motives and contempt for the initiative has been palpable, with commentators denouncing the Foundation as “[blood money of tobacco giants](#)” and “[a wolf in sheep's clothing](#)”. WHO, meanwhile, dismissed the Foundation as a “[front group](#)”, whose research and advocacy “cannot be accepted at face value”; WHO has refused to engage with the Foundation, urging governments and the public health community to follow its lead.

Many view, with good reason, the interests of tobacco companies as fundamentally irreconcilable with public health. As Martin McKee and colleagues argue in a linked Comment, if Philip Morris were truly sincere about its desire for a smoke-free world, it would stop its opposition to measures proven to reduce smoking rates, such as advertising bans, tax increases, plain packaging, and health warnings. It would cease all manufacturing, marketing, lobbying, and litigation activities.

Critics have also suggested that harm reduction is the wrong public health approach for smoking cessation because it undermines efforts to stop people, especially younger people, from taking up smoking. Furthermore, the efficacy of e-cigarettes as an aid to smoking cessation is not proven and long-term data on their safety are not yet available. Although e-cigarettes do not contain many of the disease-causing chemicals present in conventional cigarettes, they do contain other substances, such as formaldehyde and flavouring compounds, whose long-term effects on health are unknown.

Yach is no stranger to controversy and parallels can be drawn with a previous initiative. After leaving WHO, where he had led efforts to combat obesity-related diseases, Yach joined food and drink manufacturer PepsiCo. While there, he helped the company increase its portfolio of healthy products and pushed for reductions in salt, sugar, and fat in its products.

Unlike food, however, tobacco has zero health benefits—only harms. By the creation of the Foundation, the risk of setting back the tobacco control cause is very real. It might even be the biggest mistake in the history of the tobacco control movement. Nevertheless, history tells us that sometimes extraordinary challenges demand extraordinary actions. Simply boycotting the Foundation, as WHO suggests, is a mistake. As unpalatable as it may seem to engage with the tobacco industry, the public health community should be open to dialogue and debate with all parties, including holding Yach and the Foundation accountable for their promises and commitments. Only then, will we beat the tobacco scourge and help to prevent the projected 1 billion deaths attributable to smoking this century.

Every piece of evidence available so far about the role of the tobacco industry in the tobacco control movement suggests that this initiative will fail—and will fail badly. The default of the tobacco industry is to sow doubt, lie, obfuscate, attack individuals, and obstruct all efforts to control tobacco use. There is no reason to think that the Foundation is anything other than part of this damaging strategy. But, in truth, it is premature to judge the

Foundation before its work has begun. Yach is a respected public health leader. If anyone can achieve the objectives of the Foundation, it is him. But the odds of success are poor. And the costs of failure will not only be to Yach's reputation. They will represent another victory for an industry that sells death and disability.

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