

Big Tobacco Is Funding the Anti-Smoking Lobby – Leaked Documents Reveal the Real Reason Why

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Health

Despite talk of a smoke-free world, Big Tobacco is up to its same old tricks.



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The world's top experts on tobacco and health gathered at a conference in South Africa last week to discuss how to prevent an estimated a billion people dying of smoking-related diseases this century.

One of the most controversial issues at the conference, that's theme was "Uniting the world for a tobacco-free generation", was a new organisation set up last year called the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World (FSFW). This altruistic-sounding foundation argues it is "an independent, non-profit organisation created to accelerate global efforts to reduce health impacts and deaths from smoking, with the goal of ultimately eliminating smoking worldwide".

The Foundation is headed by Derek Yach, a former World Health Organisation (WHO) official who worked on the groundbreaking global treaty to tackle smoking, the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC).

So far, so good – except that the foundation is far from uniting the public health community. The problem for many experts is that the FSFW is to receive US\$80m annually – for the next 12 years – from the world’s largest tobacco company, Philip Morris International (PMI), the makers of the Marlboro brand.

Given the tobacco industry’s well-documented and decades-long history of manipulating science and health, something which Yach himself has written about, one of the key questions at the conference was whether to engage with the FSFW or not.

Finding new allies

One panel session at the conference noted that the founding of the FSFW “raises critical questions for tobacco control leaders” in that it “violates a fundamental tenet of tobacco control in accepting direct industry funding. It may distract from FCTC priorities, confuse media, the public, and policymakers, and advance the industry’s ‘partnership’ narrative.” Another session, called Breaking Big Tobacco’s Grip, warned of the tobacco industry’s attempts to rebrand itself as “credible”, “changed” or “responsible”.

And it seems that this is exactly what PMI is doing. The company’s website now says PMI is “designing a smoke-free future”. And earlier this year, the company took out adverts boldly claiming the world’s largest producer of cigarettes was trying to “give up”, too.

So what is going on? PMI reportedly is investing billions of dollars in an attempt at reputation rehabilitation to try and shift the debate away from a company vilified for decades, to one that can be trusted. But there is a big distinction between “smoke-free” and “tobacco-free”. PMI’s vision for a “smoke-free future”, is one in which consumers do not quit tobacco, but switch from cigarettes to “reduced risk products” which are heated tobacco products. As PMI’s CEO, André Calantzopoulos, concedes:

Our paramount business strategy is to replace cigarettes with less harmful, smoke-free alternatives. That’s what we call a smoke-free future.

Sold under the IQOS brand, these sleekly designed devices heat rather than burn tobacco. Although being heavily promoted by PMI, their safety is an ongoing debate.

Leaked documents



The industry is still hoping for a bright future for tobacco. Credit: Shutterstock

Insight into PMI's public relations plans are outlined in two recently leaked documents published by Reuters, both produced by the company in 2014.

The first document, entitled: "Corporate affairs approach and issues" warned that the future for Big Tobacco "will not become easier" as the industry faced pressures from increased regulation, active anti-smoking organisations and "denormalisation", where it becomes increasingly socially unacceptable to smoke. To counter this, the company planned to promote RRP, or reduced risk products, such as iQOS. This will "preserve consumers right to buy tobacco products".

The second document, a ten-year corporate affairs plan, gives further insight. The company's overall objective was to "be 'for' something" and "establish PMI as a trusted and indispensable partner, leading its sector and bringing solutions to the table". It wanted to "establish the legitimacy of tobacco companies to be a part of the regulatory debate on RRP" and to be "part of the solution". Instead of being accused of producing a product that kills up to one in two of its long-term users, this is a bold attempt to become a "trusted partner" offering "solutions".

But Big Tobacco's less scrupulous habits die hard. The documents also outline PMI's intention to use the PR strategy of divide and rule, splitting the public health community by working with some organisations that promote harm reduction. PMI wants to "find allies that cannot be ignored" and "amplify voices of 'harm reduction' supporters vs 'prohibitionists'".

"On e-cigarettes and other reduced risk products, we have a great story to tell; there are divisions within the anti-tobacco movement" that can be exploited. This was evident at the recent conference.

The corporate plans also identified working via third parties such as an “alliance of credible messengers” and “third-party coalition building”. PMI stated there was a need to use consultants as “door-openers”, “spin doctors” and “strategists” and to come up with “one-liners for PMI and its allies”.

One such one-liner is the vision of a “smoke-free world”. Yach denies vehemently he is acting as a spin doctor for the industry he spent years fighting and is not being naive working with PMI. He urges people to join his “movement for a smoke-free world”.

Meanwhile, PMI said in response to the leaked documents:

We believe that the active participation of public health experts, policy-makers, scientists, and the industry is the best way to effectively address tobacco regulations in the genuine interest of today’s billion smokers. It is our hope that moving forward, all tobacco policy makers will invite open dialogue, and in the meantime we will continue to speak with governments about policies that can address the impact of smoking on health.

But whether by default or design (with the leaked documents pointing to the latter), PMI’s funding of the FSFW is dividing the public health community into those who will take tobacco money to explore harm reduction and those who see the Foundation as the latest manifestation of Big Tobacco’s disingenuous playbook.

As this debate continues, PMI’s leaked ten-year plan outlines that the company intends to “maximise commercial opportunities and grow market share” of traditional cigarettes. How PMI reconciles this with its objectives of a “smoke-free world” remains to be seen.

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