

Towards a smoke-free world? Philip Morris International's new Foundation is not credible



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Smoking causes more than 7 million deaths each year¹ and tobacco companies have known, since at least 1950, that their products are lethal and addictive. Now Philip Morris International (PMI) is committing nearly US\$1 billion over 12 years to the Philip Morris Foundation for a Smoke-Free World that will “fund scientific research designed to eliminate the use of smoked tobacco around the globe”.² In a *Lancet Viewpoint* in this issue, the Foundation’s President Derek Yach argues it will support “an unswerving focus...to improve public health and human wellbeing”.³ What should we make of this?

Evidence from exposés and leaked documents offers no indication that the tobacco industry has become less cynical and dishonest over time.⁴ Indeed, a 2016 judgment in a challenge to the introduction of plain packaging in the English High Court concluded that the tobacco industry “facilitates and furthers, quite deliberately, a health epidemic. And moreover, a health epidemic which imposes vast negative health and other costs upon the very State that is then being expected to compensate the property right holder [tobacco companies] for ceasing to facilitate the epidemic.”⁵ To the extent that the tobacco industry has changed, it has been to become more strategic by using lobbyists, front organisations, and litigation to prevent or delay governmental action to reduce smoking. PMI has consistently opposed measures such as advertising bans, tax increases, strong health warnings, and smoke-free measures—all listed among “Risk Factors” in the company’s statutory declarations.⁶

One of the tobacco industry’s strategies is to support research, pursued over many years as part of its public relations programme,⁷ and described in a 2000 US District Court judgment as “a sophisticated public relations vehicle based on the premise of conducting independent scientific research—to deny the harms of smoking and reassure the public”.⁸ Involvement in research provides enormous public relations benefits for tobacco companies, and opportunities to circumvent Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), ratified by 180 countries and the European Union, which precludes tobacco industry involvement in public health policies. Such research involvement enables the tobacco industry to work with, recruit, and

set agendas for scientists, and to generate divisions in the tobacco control community. There is nothing new about tobacco companies solemnly expressing concerns about smoking and health,⁹ while ignoring, attacking, or undermining the evidence. Indeed, in 1997 the Philip Morris Chief Executive Officer asserted that if presented with evidence that smoking caused lung cancer, he would “shut it [production] down instantly”.¹⁰

In his *Viewpoint*, Yach seeks to justify the new PMI project by arguing that action to implement the FCTC has been too slow, and he states that the Foundation “supports and endorses implementation of all elements of the FCTC”.³ But this argument fails to pass the most elementary credibility test. The main obstacle to implementation of the FCTC (described in an internal PMI presentation as “a runaway train”¹¹) has been fierce opposition from PMI and other tobacco companies. According to a Reuters report by Kalra and colleagues, leaked PMI documents “present a company that has focused its vast global resources on bringing to heel the world’s tobacco control treaty”.¹² Indeed, among many critics of the latest PMI initiative, the FCTC Convention Secretariat “regards this tobacco industry-funded initiative as a clear attempt to breach the WHO FCTC by interfering in public policy”, noting that “It is a deeply alarming development aimed at damaging the treaty’s implementation, particularly through the Foundation’s contentious research programmes”, and that any collaboration with the Foundation is a clear breach of Article 5.3.¹³ WHO subsequently said that it “will not partner with the Foundation. Governments should not partner with the Foundation and the public health community should follow this lead”.¹⁴

Notwithstanding PMI’s claims to seek a “smoke-free world”, cigarettes remain the company’s “core” product¹⁵ which it continues to promote using youth-oriented marketing, such as the current global “Be Marlboro” campaign, and targeting low-income and middle-income countries.^{16,17} PMI, like other tobacco companies, may well want to sell a range of products, but anybody who believes that they really do want to see a smoke-free world is, we argue, living in a fantasy world.

For the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control see <http://www.who.int/fctc/en>

Big numbers such as \$1 billion sound impressive, just as they have done for the alcohol and junk food companies with which Yach has previously been involved.^{18,19} But \$80 million a year is about 0.1% of PMI's revenues and less than 1% of its profits,²⁰ and must be seen in the context of billions spent on other forms of industry promotion and lobbying. PMI alone reportedly funded more than 160 employees and consultants to lobby against just one measure (the Tobacco Products Directive) in the European Union.²¹ In 2017, PMI renewed its Ferrari motor racing sponsorship,²² previously estimated at \$160 million a year.²³

In line with the advice of J W Hill, President of global public relations company Hill and Knowlton, in the 1950s to tobacco companies about the public relations value of presenting themselves as supporters of science,⁷ the launch of the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World³ has attracted media coverage enabling PMI to present itself in a positive light. Just wait for the media coverage that will come from every new funding round, grant, and discussion paper. The exercise could almost have been designed to illustrate categories listed by Moodie²⁴ in a paper on unhealthy industry tactics: "create arms-length front organizations"; "manufacture false debate and insist on balance" (including "divert attention from harmful products"; "focus on corporate social responsibility"); and "frame key issues in creative ways".

Yach's own list of priority research areas for the Foundation³ fits perfectly with tobacco industry aims of driving the national and international public, policy, and media focus away from evidence-based measures that will reduce smoking, and towards industry-friendly distraction strategies. Notably, nowhere in his list is there anything about how best to promote action and advocacy for those crucial measures that PMI opposes.

There is action that PMI could take to deliver a smoke-free world. It could end its ferocious opposition¹¹ to the evidence-based measures recommended by WHO and the FCTC to reduce smoking. It could end its manufacturing, marketing, lobbying, and litigation activities. And, as a concerned individual from Palau writes poignantly, "Philip Morris, if you are seriously concerned about saving the people of the Pacific, please stop sending us your products" (Bena Sakuma, personal communication).

But PMI won't do any of that. This latest initiative changes nothing. Tobacco companies will continue to lie and deceive. They will continue to seek and find

researchers and others—"lobbyists, door-openers, strategists, spin doctors"²⁵—who are willing to accept money and work with an industry that still knowingly sells and markets a product that will kill between half and two-thirds of its regular users.²⁶ PMI will continue to promote its core product and to oppose FCTC implementation and measures such as tax increases, advertising bans, and plain cigarette packaging. Meanwhile, governments should continue to pursue evidence-based measures that have been shown to reduce smoking. They must exclude tobacco companies from any policy involvement. Health organisations should continue to press for action and expose the aims and activities of the tobacco industry. Scientists should reject the siren songs of involvement in tobacco industry promotions. And the public should be aware that Big Tobacco remains as it was, the main cause of premature death and disability from the world's most preventable pandemic.

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Catastrophic medical insurance in China

China's medical insurance system has changed dramatically in the past two decades. The country's most established programme, the Urban Employee Basic Medical Insurance, dates back to the mid-1990s and initially covered only 109 million employees of state-owned and collective enterprises.¹ In the early 2000s, the Chinese Government established two additional insurance programmes, the New Cooperative Medical Scheme

(NCMS) for rural residents and the Urban Resident Medical Insurance (URMI) programme for self-employed and unemployed urban residents. These three insurance schemes enabled China to achieve near universal health-care coverage, with more than 1.3 billion Chinese (about 97% of the population) having some form of medical insurance.² However, this nationwide coverage was insufficient for service provision and financial protection, and health-care expenses remained a concern for patients. For instance, insurance reimbursement rates were as low as 30–40% for NCMS before 2009.³ With high out-of-pocket costs, catastrophic illnesses⁴ were often financially devastating for patients and led families into poverty.

In 2009, China's health reforms focused on reducing out-of-pocket spending.⁵ Led by Zhigang Sun who was the former director of the Office of Health Reform in the State Council, catastrophic medical insurance was introduced in 2012, piloted in more than 134 cities from 2013, and implemented nationally in 2016. Within 1 year, more than 4 million patients with a catastrophic illness received financial assistance through this programme.⁶

Catastrophic medical insurance, which has no additional fees, provides supplementary coverage for individuals insured through URMI and NCMS and is mainly funded



Damir Sapozhnikov/Reuters