

Accepting Tobacco Industry Funding for Research: An Overview of the Issues

I. Introduction

Today more than ever, tobacco companies have an interest in portraying a positive corporate image. Funding external research is one strategy this industry has used to counter studies demonstrating the negative effects of tobacco use and to deflect criticisms about its business practices. Although some tobacco industry-funded research has been of high quality, many studies it has sponsored on the risks of active and passive smoking have been shown not to be. Indeed, the higher quality research has focused on substances other than tobacco as a cause of adverse health outcomes; this has been called “distracting research” because it contributes to the playing down of the negative impacts of tobacco use. Further, it has been documented that many grants from tobacco industry research councils were controlled by industry lawyers rather than by scientific advisory boards, and they were awarded specifically to promote research “controversies.”

While the tobacco industry continues to set up external funding programs, several U.S. schools of public health and organizations that fund tobacco-related science have instituted formal policies restricting tobacco industry sponsorship of research. In September 2001, the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco adopted a position statement to encourage its members not to solicit or accept support from the tobacco industry, to continue refusing support from the tobacco industry for Society activities, and to “not endorse the support of its members’ research or their participation in other activities funded by the tobacco industry.”

There are legitimate arguments both for and against accepting tobacco industry funding for research. The purpose of this background paper is to provide an overview of the issues surrounding research sponsorship by the tobacco industry. Seven key issues will be discussed followed by a brief summary of what we know about university, journal and research society practices in this area. A selected bibliography can be found at the end of this document.

II. The Issues

1. Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is a key value in university settings. Some believe that imposing any boundaries on researchers, including prohibiting them from accepting funding from certain sources, is an anathema to the ideals of academia. They argue that any such restriction could lead to a stifling of necessary scientific debate because there would be fewer funding options. If it is perceived that debate is curbed in any way researchers and their institutions may eventually lose some of their credibility. It is important to note, however, that a number of boundaries are already imposed on academic research. For example, institutional review boards are federally mandated in the United States, and academic research must adhere to human subjects and other ethical standards (e.g., scientific integrity, financial conflicts of interest). Further, funding agencies may place particular requirements on the use of their funds, and academic institutions may also have their own rules and regulations about the conduct of research and the use of research funds. In addition to mandated requirements, scientists also have an obligation to society to identify real health problems and promote resolutions, while institutions have an obligation to undertake research that benefits mankind. Some may contend that because the tobacco industry has deliberately worked to obstruct these responsibilities, arguments claiming the coexistence of academic freedom and tobacco-funded research are moot. It could also be argued that these obligations preclude relationships with an industry that knowingly kills its customers and that has systematically suppressed, manipulated and distorted the scientific record.

2. Respectability by Association

It has been argued that recipients of tobacco funding can provide these companies with respectability and legitimacy by association. By supporting research, the tobacco industry can claim it is acting responsibly and in good faith, while at the same time generating good publicity. Indeed, this industry has pointed to the reputable institutions it has funded in an attempt to gain prestige and win the approval of juries. Recipients of tobacco funding may defend the funder's interests; more subtly, they may remain silent on issues that impact negatively on the tobacco industry. These behaviors could help contribute to tobacco company objectives that undermine public health. There are new concerns that the tobacco industry is trying to gain respectability from its associations with universities under the banner of corporate social responsibility. In 2000, British American Tobacco (BAT) donated £3.8 million for an International Center for Corporate Social Responsibility at the University of Nottingham. The following year Imperial Tobacco in Canada, which is owned by BAT, made a contribution to a Toronto university's certificate program in corporate social responsibility.

3. Tobacco is "Special"

If universities prohibit the acceptance of tobacco money for research, will, or should, this lead to prohibiting the acceptance of research funds from tobacco sister companies or from other industries? Where should academia draw the line? Tobacco is not the only industry that has demonstrated questionable conduct. Clearly, most industries would have an economic interest in the outcomes of research they fund, resulting in a great potential for conflicts of interest. Pharmaceutical companies have



shown some suspect practices vis-à-vis its relationships with academic research. For example, drug companies have “bought” journal editorials, marketing departments rather than medical or scientific departments fund and oversee some studies, and they have been accused of trying to ruin the careers of scientists who have publicized research findings that would be detrimental to these companies. Research has shown that having a financial relationship with a pharmaceutical company is strongly associated with publishing views that are favorable to this industry. The asbestos industry also funded research aimed at quelling fears about the negative health impacts of asbestos. The asbestos companies sponsored little epidemiological research or studies that explored the relationship between asbestos and cancer. The companies dictated the research strategy of the Asbestosis Research Council, vetted publications and sometimes censored publications. Despite potential influence from any corporate funder, some argue that tobacco is “special” and that this industry should be treated differently from other private sector sources. Tobacco is a unique product because it is addictive, toxic and lethal to half of its long-term users; further, the number of people harmed by tobacco worldwide is of epidemic magnitude. Moreover, tobacco industry products are not regulated like other consumer products; historically they have been exempt from food and drug legislation, consumer product safety legislation and hazardous product legislation. Given the immense harms of tobacco industry products, and the fact that they are not required for subsistence, some argue that the tobacco industry cannot be a legitimate partner in funding scientific research.

4. Tobacco Products are Legal

Those who support the acceptance of tobacco industry funds argue that tobacco companies are legal businesses and that their products are legal, thus, there should be no reason for rejecting their money for research purposes. Furthermore, it can be argued that it is preferable to take tobacco money for research (a societal “good”) rather than leave it in tobacco company coffers where it can be used for the marketing and promotion of tobacco products. Indeed, university-industry partnerships continue to be strongly encouraged by both government and by universities themselves. However, with revelations that industry sometimes has very strong controls over the conduct of what is supposed to be independent academic research, concerns have been raised about whether science is being driven by a responsibility to contribute to a healthy, productive and just society, or by the market place and stock prices. Some worry that if universities appear to be responding to the profit motive, they will lose credibility and subsequently the public trust. In addition, some believe that the scientific community has a moral and ethical imperative not to collaborate with an industry that is increasing its presence and predatory practices in developing countries where the regulatory climate and public attitudes toward the tobacco industry are more susceptible to abuse by this industry. Although tobacco companies insist that they are better corporate citizens than ever before, at least in developed countries, their actions still do not support their words.

5. The Need for Funds

An argument in favor of allowing researchers to take tobacco funding is that there are insufficient funds to support all potentially useful research in this area. It is argued that there are no other funders that could (or would) step in to fund the type of research that tobacco companies are willing to support. Further, some believe that just as the pharmaceutical companies are required to support research to



evaluate their products, tobacco companies should also be expected to fund research for the evaluation of its own products. Indeed, many are quick to criticize research about new tobacco devices when it is conducted by tobacco industry scientists. Such research may be more credible if conducted by the academic community. Currently, however, even academic scientists who take tobacco money are often suspect. This means that there is very little independent verification of claims being made by the tobacco industry about its products and there is little ability to test these products before they appear on the market. Thus, the status quo suggests that without a shift in attitudes about tobacco industry funding for research, a truly effective and acceptable harm reduction product developed by the tobacco industry, for example, could never receive support from most members of the tobacco control community, at least not in a timely manner. Of course if status quo views about accepting tobacco money for research change, parameters would have to be set up and enforced to ensure that full scientific independence is maintained. It may be that the best scenario for funding studies that evaluate novel tobacco industry products would be through an industry-funded neutral third-party organization responsible for adjudicating research proposals and administering the funds. Still, many argue that a need for funds is not a sufficient reason to accept sponsorship from an industry with a history of funding research aimed at promoting “controversies” and distracting attention away from tobacco’s adverse health effects.

6. Ethical Guidelines and Disclosure Policies

Ethical guidelines exist to protect research from undue influence on the part of the funder. Further, disclosure of funding sources, the peer review process and some financial conflict-of-interest policies are often thought to be sufficient to ensure scientific impartiality. Nonetheless, industry sponsors may exert influence over the scientific process at multiple points: withholding “negative” findings resulting in publication bias, influencing the study design, limiting investigators’ access to data and having control over publication. In order to address these concerns, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) updated its “Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals.” However, a recent study found that U.S. medical schools failed to include provisions in their agreements with industry sponsors of multi-center clinical trials that adhered to the ICMJE guidelines for accountability, access to data and control of publication. Even if ethical guidelines exist and are adopted, they may not be enforced. A recent study found that potential conflicts-of-interest with private industry are rarely reported. Further, it has been argued that guidelines for industry-sponsored research are not sufficient when dealing with the tobacco industry because they do not address the topics of research (i.e., they would not protect against “distracting research”), nor do they address other possible conflict-of-interest relationships between the industry and researchers or their institutions such as the acceptance of donations from these companies. There are also ethical issues arising from the source of tobacco industry research funds – researchers who are sponsored by the tobacco industry must accept that these funds originate directly from the sale of cigarettes, including the sale of cigarettes to minors. In addition, some point out that scientists have a professional obligation to consider how their research findings may be used by others. Scientists who willingly conduct research they know will be beneficial to the objectives of the tobacco industry may be taken to task; similarly, some may argue that ignorance or naivety is an unsatisfactory defense for those who enter into research relationships with tobacco companies. At this time it is likely that journal submissions and grant proposals that acknowledge current or past relationships with the tobacco industry will be subject to heightened scrutiny.

7. Funding Eligibility

One development relevant to this debate is that taking tobacco money could jeopardize eligibility for funding from other sources. Cancer funding agencies, in particular, are beginning to take a hard line on tobacco funding. The National Cancer Institute of Canada, the National Heart Foundation of Australia and some members of the Association of European Cancer Leagues will not fund researchers who receive support from the tobacco industry. Cancer Research UK will not fund researchers if their research institute, university faculty or school receives tobacco funds. This organization is currently reviewing its code of practice on Tobacco Industry Funding to Universities with the aim of taking an even stronger stand. Cancer councils in Australia have taken the strongest position to date: they will not fund individuals if anyone in their institution receives tobacco support. The American Legacy Foundation (Legacy) will not fund applicants that are “in current receipt of any grant monies or in-kind contribution from any tobacco manufacturer, distributor, or other tobacco-related entity, ” and expects that grantees will remain free from tobacco-related contributions for the duration of the grant. In Pennsylvania, institutions receiving tobacco money are ineligible for settlement-based state funding for research and programming. Just as evidence about the negative health impacts of secondhand smoke had a radical effect on the tobacco-control policy debate, the above funding policies also have the potential to quickly lead to changes in university positions about whether individual researchers can choose to accept tobacco industry funds. The academic community will have to address the ethical issues that arise when the actions of one researcher limit the choices of another.

III. Examples of University, Journal and Research Society Policies

There have been no systematic studies exploring the behaviors of individual researchers vis-à-vis accepting research funding from tobacco companies. However, there have been a few studies in which institutions were the unit of analysis. An Australian survey of institutions of higher learning reported that 30% accepted research funds from the tobacco industry in 1991-92, while 2% had institutional policies not to accept research funds from this source. A 1997 study of tobacco associations in the seven New Zealand universities found that five had no formal policies and one had a general policy to disassociate with research that "was not in the public interest." Based on an analysis of papers published from 1988-94, all UK medical schools but one had accepted tobacco money. An early 1990s survey of U.S. medical schools reported that 55% had received research funding from the tobacco industry. A recent study of Canadian universities found that 11% received tobacco research funding from 1996-1999, while none had a policy banning such funding; among the faculties of medicine, 25% had received tobacco research funding, and none had a policy to ban acceptance of these funds.

Journals and scientific societies have also debated these issues. The medical section of the American Lung Association, through the American Thoracic Society, has a policy that its two journals will not review papers reporting on research funded by the tobacco industry. The Journal of Health Psychology also will not accept articles arising from tobacco industry-sponsored research. The Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco does provide membership to tobacco industry scientists as long as they are willing to sign a statement indicating, among other things, that they will "encourage research on public health efforts for the prevention and treatment of cigarette smoking and tobacco use." Still, concerns about the presence of tobacco industry scientists at the Society conferences and on its listserv continue to be raised. Some members may feel that these concerns also extend to academic researchers who accept funding from the tobacco industry. Given that university, journal, research society and funding agency policies regarding tobacco industry-sponsored research are on the increase, it is an opportune time for tobacco control researchers to discuss whether there are any conditions under which acceptance of such funds would be acceptable, and if so, what those conditions might be.

IV. Selected Bibliography

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