

Why is Meharry taking money from Juul Labs?

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On June 7, Meharry Medical College announced the establishment of the Meharry Center for the Study of Social Determinants of Health to examine the impact of smoking, drinking, poor nutrition and poverty on underserved communities.

The first initiative will involve a five-year study of tobacco and nicotine-related products through a \$7.5 million research grant from Juul Labs, Inc.

This venture should raise eyebrows. For one thing, it is funded by the maker of the most popular electronic cigarette among teenagers, Juul. For another, the proposed research does not break new ground.

We have long known that African Americans' have higher mortality rates from lung cancer, emphysema and heart disease attributed to cigarette smoking.

Indeed, cigarette smoking is the top preventable cause of death in African Americans.

Meharry's acceptance of money from Juul Labs, Inc. — note the implied scientific name of the company — gives the appearance of tacitly endorsing the hypothesis that electronic cigarettes are a less harmful alternative to cigarettes and could save lives if smokers switched to them.

However, any such saving of lives is being undermined by the dramatic rise in teenagers becoming addicted to nicotine through

Juul Labs is the largest maker of e-cigarettes and has close ties to tobacco and sold 35% of its stake to Altria, maker of Marlboro.

e-cigarettes. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 25% of high school seniors are regular e-cigarette users. Juul, which has captured 75% of the e-cigarette market in just three years, contains twice the concentration of nicotine than other e-cigarettes, and the younger the age of exposure to nicotine the more rapid and strong the addiction.

In a public letter, Meharry President and CEO Dr. James Hildreth observes that "Targeted unscrupulously by the tobacco industry, our community is replete with smokers." Yet he fails to acknowledge that Juul Labs, Inc. is itself an integral part of the tobacco industry.

Last December, the company sold a 35% stake to Altria, manufacturer of the nation's top-selling cigarette brand, Marlboro.

Needless to add, Altria has never made protecting the health of African Americans a part of its mission. To the contrary, the company, which helped write the 2009 law that gave the U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulatory control over tobacco products, threatened to drop its support if a ban on menthol were included in the bill. Upwards of 90% of African Americans who smoke

buy menthol brands, far higher than any other group.

Giving grants to study the e-cigarette harm reduction hypothesis is a clever strategy to make e-cigarette company money socially acceptable, just as the tobacco industry made it seem in the 1970s and 1980s with its support of many African American civic and cultural groups.

Even after having been found liable in federal court in 2006 for violating civil racketeering laws by lying about the health risks of cigarette smoking for 50 years, Altria has found willing research partners in academia, notably the University of Virginia and Virginia Commonwealth University. Getting Meharry's name attached to Juul is another big win for Big Tobacco.

In his vigorous defense of Meharry's partnering with JUUL Labs, Inc. in The Tennessean, Hildreth claims that the college will be in control and "engaged on the forefront as our nation grapples with the emerging e-cigarette industry and its implications, including its allure for youth."

Perhaps. But after having studied the tobacco industry for over 40 years, I believe that Juul and Altria will benefit from Meharry's credibility far more than Meharry or the public will benefit from this grant. In a way, the most addictive thing about tobacco is money.

Alan Blum, MD is professor and Gerald Leon Wallace, MD, Endowed Chair in Family Medicine, director of the University of Alabama Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society.