

## Hard Habit to Break

M.D. Anderson just can't say no to research funding from the tobacco industry

By D.J. Wilson

**M**D. Anderson Cancer Center banned the sale of cigarettes back in the mid-1970s, becoming one of the first hospitals in the country to do so. The University of Texas-affiliated institution also led the way in creating the smoke-free environment that exists today in most large buildings when its president, Dr. Charles LeMaistre, outlawed smoking inside M.D. Anderson's facilities in 1989.

"Everybody here," explains Steve Stuyck, M.D. Anderson's vice president for public affairs, "abhors tobacco and is opposed to the marketing of tobacco products."

As Dr. Joel Dunnington has learned, however, that abhorrence is not so pronounced that it keeps scientists at M.D. Anderson from taking money from the Council for Tobacco Research, an arm of the tobacco industry that has been censured by no less an authority than the American Medical Association, an organization not exactly known for its cutting-edge activism.

Dunnington has been working — unsuccessfully — to wean M. D. Anderson, considered one of the nation's premier cancer research and treatment hospitals, from its reliance on tobacco-tainted funding. Last summer, the radiologist stood before his colleagues on M.D. Anderson's faculty senate and delivered an impassioned plea urging the cancer center not to accept research grants from the Council for Tobacco Research. His speech carried the day, as the faculty senators voted 15-12 in favor of his recommendation.

But Dunnington's eloquence was for naught. M.D. Anderson's research council, an internal group of faculty department heads who oversee research funding at the center, refused to go along with the faculty senate's vote. And without that group's backing, Dunnington's long-standing ambition to ban

tobacco dollars was doomed, since it was assumed that LeMaistre, who helped write the landmark 1963 Surgeon General's report on the dangers of smoking, would change the institution's policy only if the research council supported the faculty senate vote.

"We did away with selling cigarettes at M.D. Anderson many years ago, as a statement that we are a cancer center and that we shouldn't be selling them," says an exasperated Dunnington. "But yet we'll still turn around and take the money from the profits on those sales to our patients and use [it] to do research."

Dunnington estimates that the Council for Tobacco Research — which he dismisses as a "fraud" perpetrated by the tobacco industry — has funded about \$500,000 worth of research at M.D. Anderson in recent years. Dr. Anthony J. Mastromarino, M. D. Anderson's associate vice president for research, says the council provided only \$176,000 in this fiscal year for three studies on mammary tumors, colon cancer and gene expression in muscle tissue. Those figures represent only a small fraction of the center's total research budget, which this year amounts to about \$86 million. Both sides cite the relative monetary insignificance of the council's largess to bolster their arguments — with opponents claiming it allows the tobacco industry to buy respectability for a pitance and proponents maintaining that it's such a small amount that it's hardly worth arguing about.

That the Council for Tobacco Research uses its research funding for its own public relations purposes is not contested by either side. The council was created in 1954 by the tobacco industry and to this day is funded by tobacco companies. From 1954 through 1991, the council's board of scientific advisors has bestowed funding of more than \$185 million for 1,246 original articles by more than 850 scientists. That's a lot of money, but it pales when compared to the 1993 advertising budget of the tobacco industry — about \$5.2 billion.

In addition to its deployment in the public relations battle against anti-smoking forces, the council-funded research also is cited in defense of lawsuits against the tobacco industry, Dunnington says. In one recent unsuccessful lawsuit brought in Mississippi by the family of a deceased smoker, tobacco industry lawyers showed the jury a poster listing the institutions that received funding from the

Council for Tobacco Research. M.D. Anderson was one of those listed.

"They had funded this much money, hundreds of millions of dollars over the past 30 years," Dunnington says the defense attorney told the jury. "And there was no clear-cut cause and effect of cigarettes and cancer and other diseases, but that they were a very interested and honorable industry and they were going to keep funding these things until they found something."

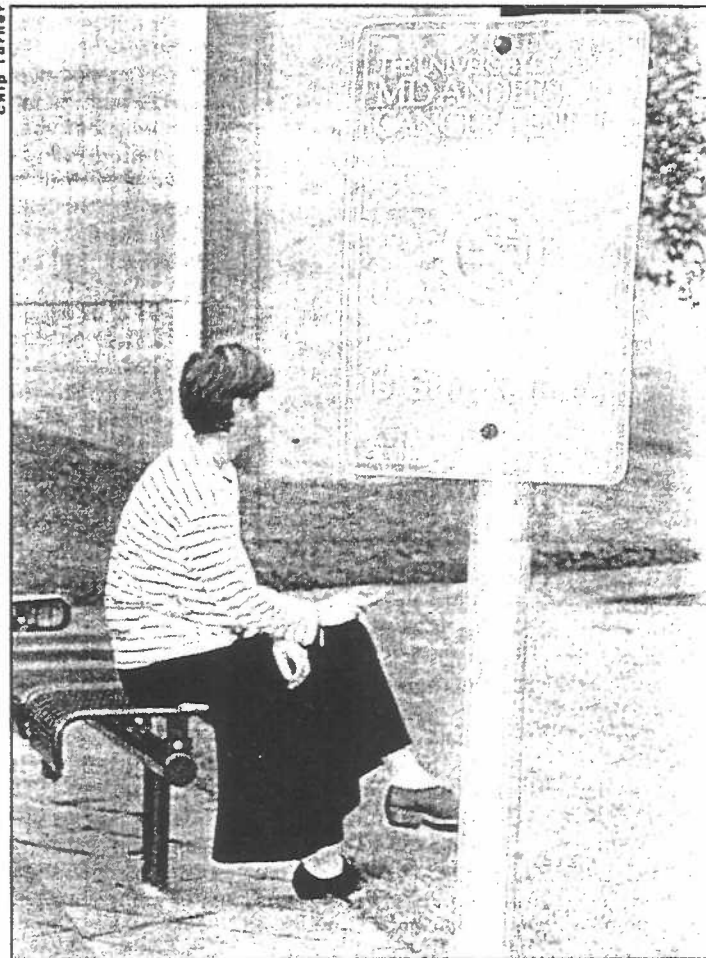
In reality, even those who support the acceptability of the funding admit — even emphasize — that very little of it supports the study of tobacco's effects on health.

Mastromarino, after examining the grants M.D. Anderson has accepted from the council, acknowledges that "few if any dealt with any kind of pulmonary disease or tobacco-related illnesses, or how tobacco directly affects body systems or disease. It's really basic research."

One national survey showed 80 percent of the studies had nothing to do with tobacco. So at least in name, the Council for Tobacco Research is suspect. In one court case, U.S. District Court Judge H. Lee Sarokin branded the council a "hoax created for public relations purposes with no intention of seeking the truth or publishing it."

But scientific research funding isn't abundant these days, and Mastromarino admits that the scarcity is one reason M.D. Anderson has allowed its researchers to keep taking the money. "I'm not saying this necessarily justi-

M.D. Anderson radiologist Dr. Joel Dunnington



Though M.D. Anderson frowns on smokers, it smiles at the money they provide.

fies the position," he says, "but the money is going to be expended for research (anyway) and 'better my lab get it than Joe Blow's in another institution,' or someplace else, particularly during a time of tight budgets and shrinking research dollars."

That view doesn't explain, Dunnington says, why M.D. Anderson took funding from the tobacco council for years when research money from other sources was "flowing fairly freely." And scant resources, he argues, are no reason to willingly take funding from an industry whose product causes an estimated 419,000 deaths per year.

"They always say research money is tight. It certainly is and it's going to get tighter," Dunnington says. "But I'm sure if you look back to 1640 they said research money was

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## I, Whitmire

**A**t a time when most Houston Democrats are moping about with hangdog looks, an upbeat and preening John Whitmire is putting his favorite personal pronoun forward to potential contributors in a letter inviting them to a December 6 fundraiser. In case the state senator didn't send you one, here's a taste:

"You and I are fortunate. I am fortunate to have your support. I am fortunate because you have always been near a phone to provide me with advice and counsel."

"You are fortunate because you are considered a special friend by me. You are fortunate because you can call me and I will stop what I am doing and call you back. In addition, I will respond to your problem with all my energy."

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"Like I said, I feel we are both very fortunate."

The one-page missive features 13 "I's," including the one with a hook: "I need you to make a contribution or raise \$1,000 for my reelection campaign. With your help I will remain politically strong .... I look forward to seeing you on December 6."

Gee, it was only three weeks ago that Whitmire was re-elected, having coasted through the Democrats' November 8 election debacle without an opponent. But apparently it's never too early to start raising money when, as the senator explained it when we contacted him by phone, he's just thinking of his constituents and "what I can do to help, how I can get things done, how I can help improve the criminal justice system...."

After that verbal workout in the first-person singular, Whitmire added, "You may not believe it, but I don't build myself up very much."

Well, there was that nine-page fax we received prior to Whitmire's stint as "governor for a day" two Saturdays ago, a traditional honor for the incoming president pro tempore of the Senate. Emceed by the ubiquitous Jim "Mattress Mac" McIngvale and prayed over by state Representative Sylvester Turner, the "governor for a day" ceremony featured a barbecue luncheon, an address by 24-hour Governor John and a reception hosted by "Governor and Mrs. Whitmire" in the Capitol rotunda. Whitmire's office also issued a five-page biography for "Governor John Whitmire" that traces his career back to his humble beginnings in Whitney, a small town near Waco:

"No running water and 'facilities' located apart from the home. Baths were taken regularly, but never easily .... The country house burned as Whitmire entered sixth grade, leaving the family penniless, possessing only the

clothes they wore. When his fellow students learned of John's misfortunes they collected \$14 to help out, which he promptly used to buy a BB gun."

As Whitmire himself explains in the bio: "No home ... no clothes, but [I] bought a BB gun. It's a wonder I'm alive to tell the story."

The story continues through tragedy and triumph, culminating in Whitmire's successful effort as chairman of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee to overhaul the Texas penal code and closing with this touching anecdote: "But to John Whitmire, the most endearing accolade came during a Dallas radio talk show interview. At the very end of the broadcast, a caller from Glen Rose, Texas, proclaimed John to be the best of all things ... 'a senator who sounds like a regular guy.'"

The kind of senator who would be at home just about anywhere, especially, say, 1st-century Rome. — Tim Fleck

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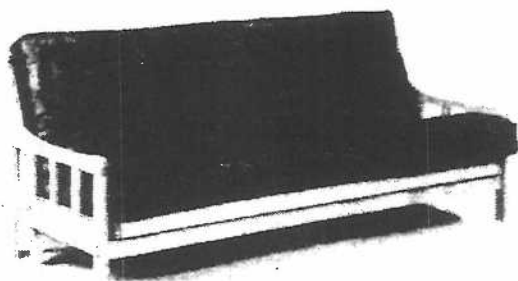
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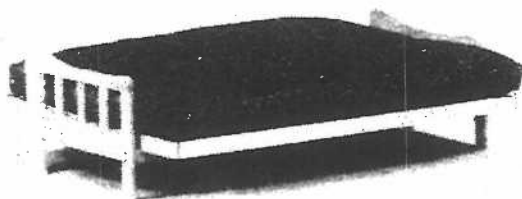
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## Tobacco Habit

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tight and in 1790 research money was tight. In 1905 I'm sure the research money was tight. In 1954 when they set up the Tobacco Institute's research council I'm sure they said money was tight."

Dunnington says scientists need to examine their work in a larger context and ask themselves if their projects are more important than the public relations or legal defense benefits the tobacco industry gets from the association. "Is your project really going to supersede the importance of the tobacco industry putting this on and getting another year's worth of saying, 'The jury's still not in,' and, 'We still aren't sure if cigarettes cause lung cancer, emphysema, heart attacks or not?'"

Another argument against the prohibition was the maintenance of academic freedom: that faculty members "should not be dictated to" when it comes to where they should seek funds. Other reasoning included the "where-do-we-draw-the-line" argument, since other companies that profit from tobacco sales (Kimberley Clark makes paper used for cigarettes) fund research projects. Following that argument, perhaps to an absurd point, the tax dollars that support University of Texas' M.D. Anderson include money from taxes on tobacco and could be called into question. "Do we distance ourselves from state appropriations? I think not. We couldn't," Mastromarino says.

The anti-tobacco contingent does not have much patience for those arguments. No one, at least not yet, has proposed prohibiting accepting funds from second-line industries who do business with cigarette makers. Certainly no one has advanced the notion of rejecting state funding, which accounts for 15 percent of M.D. Anderson's total budget.

Though Dunnington is disappointed in his most recent run at banning the Council for Tobacco Research funds — a similar effort in 1991 also failed — he thinks the tide is turning. The increasing awareness of the hazards of smoking and the growing acceptance of non-smoking areas in public places has put the tobacco industry on the defensive. The appearance by the chairman of the Council for Tobacco Research before Congress last May focused attention on the group's origin and methods, and lately some mainstream organizations have come out in opposition to its funding.

The American Medical Association last year defined the Council for Tobacco Research as part of the "tobacco industry" and now refuses financial support from it. The AMA also encourages all medical schools and their "parent universities" to follow this lead. In a Nov. 8 letter to the dean of Ohio State's College of Medicine, AMA executive vice president Dr. James Todd wrote that the mission "of medicine and of legitimate medical research can never, in our opinion, be compatible with the purposes of the tobacco industry. Medical school use of tobacco profits to fund its research compromises the trust, built over decades, with the public. The AMA strongly urges medical schools to cease accepting research funding from tobacco companies and their research front organizations."

On the state level, the Texas Medical Association passed a resolution last year to "discourage" medical school faculty from accepting tobacco-related funding.

Despite Dunnington's failures thus far, the conflict at M.D. Anderson is far from over. "I think it's going to come up again, particularly if Dr. Dunnington has anything to say about it," Mastromarino predicts. "He's not going to be content until he gets a decision not to accept the support." **HP**



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## Giving Credit Where Proper Credit Is Due

Matt Zoller Seitz's "Cyberdreams" [News, December 1] is a well-written and pretty darn thorough history of the making of *No Resistance*.

One thing worth noting, however: in addition to directing, cowriting, shooting and editing the project, Tim Thomson — not me — was also its producer. Likewise, I think he deserves to be credited as such.

Michael H. Schneider Jr.  
Coproducer, *No Resistance*  
Houston

## Smoking Out That Dunce Dunnington

In response to Mr. Wilson [News, "Hard Habit to Break," by D.J. Wilson, December 1], Dr. Dunnington is aptly named. He has been dunning the researchers at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center for years concerning the Council for Tobacco Research, simply because the money that funds basic research comes from the tobacco companies. In truth, the Council for Tobacco Research in no way seeks to influence the results of basic research, nor do they suppress the results. It is a constant wonder that the tobacco companies continue to

deny the proven detrimental effects of tobacco on health, but how many times have studies and statistics been used erroneously to justify a position? If we banned research on the basis of our fears that the information might be misconstrued or misused, the atom bomb, for example, would be nothing but a twinkle in Einstein's eye, but positive uses of atomic science would not exist and not much research would be done.

Why has Dr. Dunnington zeroed in on the Council for Tobacco Research? Other non-profit organizations that support research have tobacco company funding, including the Council for Indoor Air Research in Maryland and private foundations funded through the personal fortunes of such tobacco families as R.J. Reynolds. I am sure that the Research Triangle in North Carolina would not exist in its present world class form without tobacco money.

The truth is that research dollars are dwindling. For the first time in decades, the amount of research funding available from the federal government is declining. Private sources of funding are vital to the future of basic research in this country, research that has helped make America the foremost center for scientific and medical expertise in the world.

I am at a loss to understand the attitude of people like Dr. Dunnington. If the tobacco companies are the death-breathing dragons that he proclaims they are, why should they not be allowed to fund research that may help save the lives of their victims? Nay, they should be allowed to fund research to combat the harm they have caused, whether they admit it or not.

Corporate philanthropy is always based on enlightened self-interest. The only reason any corporation gives money away is to generate positive publicity and to convince the public that they are great guys, even if they laid off Uncle Jim while giving all the fat cat executives multimillion-dollar bonuses. If we disqualified philanthropy on the basis of self-interest, it would all but disappear.

It is a shame that the energy and intelligence of Dr. Dunnington is misguided. If he directed all of his fervor to a cause that made a positive contribution to the lives of people, what a difference he could make in the world.

Anne Oldroyd  
Houston

## Call Out the Kindergarten Cops, It's Carded Kids

California's Proposition 187 [News, "The Proposition," by Claudia Kolker, November 24] is an oddly shaped Pandorian box lined in prejudice and curiously colored nationalism. Such measures frighten me. My fears are not for the world today but rather for the world of our children.

My thoughts are of my four-year-old niece Carmen. Will her future career be crushed by the cost of spending \$6 billion to register all Social Security card holders? Only adding to the misery of a federal institution moving with velocity toward bankruptcy?

Perhaps the additional cost can be offset by even more repressive payroll taxes. Taxes she will most assuredly curse each and every payday.

The logic of issuing identity cards to toddlers eludes me. To whom will she be required to show her identification before entering the preschool sandbox? Will Social Security cards summarily replace hall passes?

As a young scholar myself, I lost my Green Hornet and Kato lunchbox time without number. I am concerned as to how Carmen will keep track of a hologram

emblazoned Social Security card. Mostly my apprehension is for all children beginning life as digits on a page. The above being one role, in one passion play, I wish them to avoid.

Proposition 187 will, at best, create a new currency of identity cards to counterfeit, and, at worst, bind us all tightly in numerical dehumanization.

Neil M. Brady  
Houston

## What We Say is, Bra, Humbug

Let's get something straight here. "Wonderbras" are as popular to men as toupees are to women [Letters, "Boy Toy," December 1]. Both are trying to sell you a bill of goods. It's just another psychic hoodwink from Madison Avenue. Just say grow.

Layton Payne  
Houston

*Editor's note: We're not sure what Mr. Payne's experience is, but here we've noticed that we garner much more attention when we wear our Wonderbras than when we wear our toupees. But then again, maybe it's just us.*

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