

By MARK METHERELL,
medical reporter

CIGARETTE packets tell us that smoking is a health hazard. An increasing number of medical scientists is also asking whether research grants financed by cigarette sales do anything for their professional health.

Two of the biggest non-Government sponsors of medical research in Australia produce drugs which are blamed for much of the self-administered ill-health and death in the community. The sponsors are the tobacco and brewing industries.

The Anti Cancer Council of Victoria has estimated the medico-social cost to Australia of smoking to be about \$1000 million a year. Based on United States scientific estimates, the cost of alcohol abuse in Australia could be about \$3000 million a year.

But the Australian Tobacco Research Foundation and the Associated Brewers cheerfully finance medical research worth more than \$500,000 a year. They are not the only industries which have sprinkled some of their profits over medical science and had their products in varying degrees, come under fire from doctors.

Confectionery makers like Mars sponsor dental conferences; fast-food chains such as McDonald's assist research on processed foods, the Australian Lead Development Association paid for studies into blood-lead levels in children.

But as Victorian Medical Research Week starts today with the perennial wringing of hands by scientists about the paucity of research funds, a quiet controversy is bubbling in the nation's laboratories about the source of those funds.

Scientists are questioning whether they should accept grants which came from the sales of the very products causing the death and disease for which the researchers are seeking solutions.

Under most scrutiny are grants from the Australian Tobacco Research Foundation. But questions are also asked about grants from the Australian Associated Brewers, whose medical research advisory committee this year poured \$214,857 into such studies as drinking in the Aboriginal community, and brain peptides in alcoholism.

Some scientists feel that given the alcohol-related incidence of liver disease, road trauma and diseases such as alcoholism and cancer of the oesophagus \$214,857 hardly seems a reasonable pay-back for research into such areas.

But scientists argue that there is a remitting factor with alcohol. With moderate use it has beneficial aspects. No such attribute can be claimed for tobacco. The Federal Health Department has stated that smoking at any level is harmful to health.

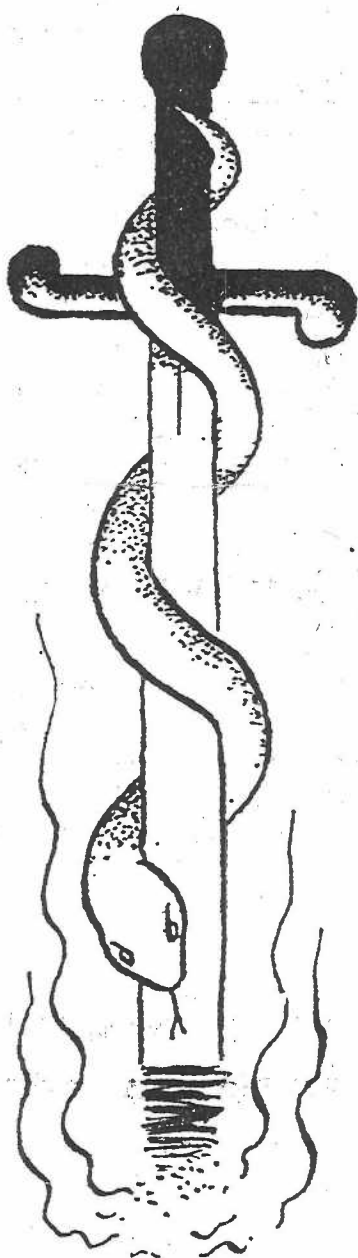
The editor of the 'Medical Journal of Australia', Dr Alan Blum, says: "For a doctor to accept money, even without tags, from the tobacco industry, is like a detective receiving money from the Mafia".

Dr Blum is an outspoken crusader against the tobacco manufacturers. As editor of Australia's foremost medical research publication, he says he must concern himself not only with the quality of data submitted to the journal but also with the financing that made the research possible.

"What are these scientists doing for mankind?" Dr Blum asks. "What does their contribution do other than having their good name linked with an industry that produces a product that has been found by every major health body in the world to cause more needless death by far than any other health hazard?"

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MEDICINE'S UNEASY MONEY



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search administrators, Professor Sir Gustav Nossal, the head of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, whether he would accept funds from the Tobacco Research Foundation, his immediate response was: "Certainly not."

"I feel I would be seriously compromised by taking their funds."

"On the other hand, I would not criticise another person who has examined his/her conscience and come to another conclusion."

Professor Nossal, probably the country's most adept lobbyist for funds, said that it could well be that some industries gave out medical research funds "to expunge their guilt or to repay society for the harm that has been done".

An estimated \$90 million will be spent on medical research in Australia this year, \$25.3 million

of it from the National Health and Medical Research Council. The rest comes from State Governments, the pharmaceutical industry, private donations and corporate sponsorship.

Both the Australian Medical Association and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians have recently expressed doubt or caution about tobacco industry sponsorship of medical research.

At a recent Industries Assistance Commission inquiry on the tobacco industry the AMA said that if the Tobacco Research Foundation's project results were produced in a form that the community could understand, and possibly marketed at big sporting or cultural events, "this might be a meeting point between the tobacco industry and the anti-smoking organisations where the health consequences of cigarette smoking could be debated."

"Yet when the industry is assailed in health matters, it does not turn to the eminent Australian academics on the board of trustees of its research foundation. It turns to North Americans," the AMA stated.

"It may be suggested that this is because these people are 'external experts'; their credentials are less likely to be checked; they will not face direct confrontation with Australian anti-smoking experts. Their arguments are semantic but sufficiently obfuscatory in their logic to confuse the issue."

In a recent policy decision, the council of the College of Physicians urged its members to refuse "to accept or administer any grants of money, to award any prizes or to be associated with any sponsorships, exhibits or advertisements which may be seen or are designed to promote the smoking of tobacco".

Earlier this year the chairman of the Australian Tobacco Research Foundation, Emeritus Professor Bickerton Blackburn, announced grants totalling \$335,165 for 18 research projects to be conducted in 1982 at 15 Australian universities or teaching hospitals.

Professor Blackburn, a prominent physician and former professor of medicine at Sydney University, said the research produced through foundation grants showed that the foundation was worthwhile.

"We get requests for large sums of money each year. The people who are doing the research do not seem to regard this as being bad money", Professor Blackburn said.

Professor Blackburn was asked whether the association with the industry of such reputable medical figures as himself and others could be seen to add acceptability to the tobacco industry.

"I think that it is not strictly true. As far as I am aware, the industry does not actually use the research foundation for any advertising... they have played it straight down the middle. We have what might be termed a low profile."

The Australian Tobacco Research Foundation was established in 1970 by the three Australian cigarette manufacturers "to support research into the relationship between Australia between tobacco smoking and human health in its widest context." It has contributed \$3 million since 1970.

This has produced research papers such as: "Immunological aspects of lung cancer and cigarette smoking"; "Relationship between tobacco smoking and reflex production of coughing"; and "The effects of maternal cigarette smoking on foetal cardiovascular and respiratory dynamics."

Why should the tobacco industry pay for research which is producing damning evidence about smoking, evidence which the industry generally still persists in disputing?

Dr Blum believes that a mechanism he describes as "reverse psychology" is involved... that the tobacco industry is being seen consciously or unconsciously as Mr Clean in apparently allowing its dirty washing to be so thoroughly investigated.

A trustee of the Tobacco Research Foundation and member of its scientific advisory committee, Professor Mick Rand, said that "a great deal of the pronouncements (on smoking) are based on emotion and personal dislike rather than on hard scientific evidence".

"I am not any kind of publicist or apologist for the tobacco industry," said Professor Rand, the head of Melbourne University's pharmacology department (which this year received about \$20,000 from the foundation), and a drug researcher of international standing.

"There is a great deal not known about tobacco smoking and while there are significant numbers of tobacco smokers, it is highly desirable to carry out research," Professor Rand said.