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Going up in smoke: institutions that take the moral high ground may lose out when it comes to securing funding for research

Charlie Bibby

# The burning tobacco question

Universities face controversy over the huge sums offered by cigarette companies to research 'reduced harm' products, says David Grimm

A 65-year-old man at a small table in a laboratory at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina, asks for his twelfth cigarette in less than eight hours. A researcher is happy to oblige. As the man lights up, technicians swarm around him to take a blood sample, make him exhale into a sensor and administer cognitive tests.

The experiment, led by neuroscientist Jed Rose, focuses on the volunteer's response to Quest, a cigarette made from tobacco genetically engineered to contain less nicotine. Dr Rose directs the university's Center for Nicotine and Smoking Cessation Research, which helps smokers kick the habit. He sees the Quest study as important because it indicates that smokers of this new product inhale less deeply than smokers of an earlier "reduced-harm" product - the low-tar cigarette - and may therefore cut their dependence on tobacco.

But the work is controversial. Quest's maker, the Vector Tobacco Company of Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, paid for the study, and tobacco giant Philip Morris funds the centre.

Since the late 1990s the tobacco industry has provided university researchers with millions of dollars to help develop a new class of reduced-harm products - including modified cigarettes such as Quest, tobacco lozenges and nicotine inhalation devices - ostensibly to reduce the hazards of smoking. Advocates say the industry is now serious about improving the safety of its products. But critics, who cite its efforts to manipulate science over the past 50 years, see nothing but the same old smoke and mirrors.

Despite the efforts of anti-smoking activists, tobacco industry funding is flourishing, igniting a debate on some campuses over whether universities should ban tobacco money and whether grant organisations should deny funding to individuals or schools that take it.

Ken Warner, a public health expert at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and president of the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco, concedes the tobacco industry was guilty of misconduct in the past but worries about restricting research.

Dr Rose thinks the tobacco industry's new focus on harm reduction may usher in a new era of tobacco-sponsored research. This research is "high quality, innovative and unique," he says, and "very different from the abuses of the past". Dr Rose, a co-inventor of the nicotine patch, says: "The real enemy is the death and disease smokers suffer. If we can use tobacco money to help people lead healthier

lives, why shouldn't we?"

Stephen Rennard, a pulmonary physician at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha who has also received tobacco industry support, agrees. "People are going to continue to smoke, and we need to make them as safe as we can. The tobacco industry needs university research to develop a safer product."

One of Dr Rennard's projects, funded by RJ Reynolds, evaluated Eclipse - a cigarette made by the company that heats rather than burns tobacco, theoretically producing less harmful smoke. Dr Rennard later used Philip Morris money to determine how much smoke the average cigarette user is exposed to. The findings may help the company design a cigarette that cuts the levels of inhaled smoke.

Dr Rennard says taking industry money required soul searching. "But in the end I realised that this research should be funded by tobacco companies. NIH resources should not be used to improve cigarettes. It would be like the government subsidising the development of a better laundry detergent."

Others think academic researchers should just say no. Simon Chapman, editor of the journal Tobacco Control and a professor of public health at the University of Sydney in Australia, says the tobacco companies in fact have little interest in public health. "They fund this research to buy respectability and ward off litigation," he says. Some worry that reduced-harm products are just a ploy to keep smokers addicted.

For many critics of mixing tobacco money with university research, the industry's history speaks for itself. For example, as the link between smoking and disease became clearer in the early 1950s, the world's largest tobacco companies established the Tobacco Industry Research Committee - later the Council for Tobacco Research - to fund research into health effects of smoking. But its main goal, internal documents reveal, was to obfuscate risks and few of the studies it funded addressed the hazards of cigarettes.

The industry also lost credibility with its previous attempts at harm reduction when it touted low-tar and filtered cigarettes as "safer", says Dr Chapman, while suppressing evidence that smokers drew harder on these cigarettes, thereby increasing their intake of carcinogens.

While scientists debate the merits of taking tobacco money, other authorities may take the decision out of their hands. Over the past decade, a number of institutions - including the Harvard School of Public Health and the University of Glasgow - have banned researchers from applying for

tobacco industry grants. Organisations such as Cancer Research UK and the Wellcome Trust no longer fund researchers who take tobacco money. The American Cancer Society, one of

'The university should be a role model. Academic freedom should not override its ethical responsibilities'

the largest private funders of cancer research, plans to adopt a similar policy this month. Ohio State University, Columbus, was in the eye of the storm in 2003 when Philip Morris offered a

medical school researcher a \$590,000 grant at the same time a state foundation offered a nursing school researcher a \$540,000 grant. But the terms of the state grant would have prohibited all other university researchers from taking tobacco money, so the school could not accept both. "There was a very heated debate among the faculty," says Tom Rosol, the university's senior associate vice president for research, who ultimately decided to take the Philip Morris grant. "It came down to the issue of academic freedom," he says. "We didn't want to accept a grant that would have placed restrictions on our investigators."

The decision sparked a backlash, and several departments, including the Comprehensive Cancer Center and the School of Public Health, enacted bans on

researchers from taking tobacco money.

A resolution approved by the University of California's Academic Senate this summer would have the opposite effect. A proposal that "no special encumbrances should be placed on a faculty member's ability to solicit or accept awards based on the source of funds" would prevent institutions in the UC system banning tobacco funding. UC president Robert Dynes describes such bans as "a violation of the faculty's academic freedom".


Not everyone believes this argument. "The university should be a role model," says Joanna Cohen, an expert on university tobacco policies at the University of Toronto. "Academic freedom should not override its ethical responsibilities."

Dr Rennard, who made himself ineligible for state

money by accepting tobacco industry funds, says: "Political positions should not determine scientific agendas. If we restrict research on moral grounds, should we ban grant money from pharmaceutical companies or industries that pollute the environment? Where do you draw the line?"

As public funding gets tighter, more universities may have to confront this question. The tobacco industry is poised to fill the financial void, but pressure on schools to shun this money is likely to increase. In the end, institutions will have to decide whether to overlook the source of this funding or take the moral high ground and watch it go up in smoke.

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