

## **The Perniciousness of Tobacco Industry-Funded Research**

*A comment for the exhibition “Universities and Tobacco: The Ties That Blind”  
by Joel Dunnington, MD*

It has now been 30 years since I sat for the interview by Ned Hibberd about the University of Texas-MD Anderson Cancer Center’s acceptance of research funding from the tobacco industry. Cigarette smoking still causes a quarter of the cancers that bring patients to MD Anderson each year -- the biggest cause by far.

I’ve since learned a lot more about how the tobacco industry has used such funding to cover and benefit itself. I learned, for instance, that the Council for Tobacco Research (CTR) sponsored secret research at the direction of cigarette company attorneys. CTR groomed potential expert defense witnesses and consultants. And CTR reaped public relations benefits by virtue of the dozens of medical schools that sought and welcomed its funding.

In studying the CTR annual reports at the Texas Medical Center Library, I was struck by the dozens of MD Anderson researchers who received funding from CTR and its forerunner the Tobacco Industry Research Council (TIRC) – more than at all but a handful of universities. The CTR reports were public documents with lengthy lists of recipients of CTR funds.

And CTR had clout. I’ve attended 54 meetings of the AMA since I was a medical student in the late-1970s. In 1992 I helped advance a resolution at the AMA House of Delegates to prohibit medical schools from accepting tobacco industry research funding. The resolution was first considered by the Reference Committee on Medical Education, where testimony from delegates in support of the resolution was overwhelming. Yet three members of the AMA Board of Trustees spoke against the resolution, as did the Chair of the Council of Medical Education, the leader of the Medical School Section, several deans of medical schools, and James Glenn MD, former dean at Emory University School of Medicine and president of Mount Sinai Medical Center (overseeing

its medical school) and was now CTR's scientific director. The resolution was defeated.

Unknown to me at the time, an MD Anderson epidemiologist, Eleanor Macdonald MS, received funding under the Special CTR Grant section run by attorneys for the cigarette companies. Macdonald's widely cited book *Epidemiology of cancer in Texas: Incidence analyzed by type, ethnic group, and geographic location*, was funded by CTR, which then used the book to promote the notion that many, many things besides cigarettes caused cancer. Macdonald also testified before Congress on behalf of the tobacco industry and briefed its research committees.

In 1994 I was an assistant professor when I introduced the Faculty Senate resolution to ban the acceptance of tobacco industry research funding at MD Anderson. The resolution passed, but a few senior research administrators, including one who accepted CTR money, were angry with me. The MD Anderson Research Council voted the proposal down, but MD Anderson's president, Mickey LeMaistre MD, a member of the original advisory committee to the Surgeon General that wrote the landmark Report on Smoking and Health in 1964, overruled the council and made it institutional policy to not accept tobacco industry funding. I believe this was the first university in the US to do so. This policy has since been amended to include e-cigarette companies.

A few years after the MD Anderson policy was passed, CTR, the Center for Indoor Air Research (another industry front group), and the Tobacco Institute (the public relations arm of the industry) were dissolved by the Master Settlement Agreement between the states and the tobacco industry. All three entities were also named in the Department of Justice RICO trial against the tobacco industry. In 2005 the industry was found guilty of civil racketeering -- part of what Judge Gladys Kessler called "a coordinated, well-financed, sophisticated public relations campaign to attack and distort the scientific evidence demonstrating the relationship between smoking and disease, claiming that the link between the two was still an 'open question.' Finally, in

doing so, they ignored the massive documentation in their internal corporate files from their own scientists, executives, and public relations people.”

A normal industry that settles a massive multi-state class action lawsuit for billions of dollars and is subsequently found guilty of racketeering would reform. The tobacco industry did not. In 2000 Philip Morris created the Philip Morris External Research Program to fund university-based research. Since that ended in 2007, the company has given research funding to the University of Virginia (\$25 million), Virginia Commonwealth University, and others. In 2015 Philip Morris International created the Foundation for A Smoke-Free World to support university-based research around the world. In 2024, the name was changed to Global Action to End Smoking which is funding research.

Every university that takes tobacco money has a legally mandated conflict of interest committee. It is unfathomable that these committees scrutinize pharmaceutical industry-funded research programs but are untroubled by funding from an industry that causes the deaths of almost half a million Americans and over eight million people around the world each year.