Journal policy on research funded by the tobacco industry

Fiona Godlee, Ruth Malone, Adam Timmis, Catherine Otto, Andrew Bush, Ian Pavord, Trish Groves

As editors of the BMJ, Heart, Thorax and BMJ Open, we have decided that the journals will no longer consider for publication any study that is partly or wholly funded by the tobacco industry. Our new policy is consistent with those of other journals including PLoS Medicine, PLoS One, PLoS Biology,1 Journal of Health Psychology;2 journals published by the American Thoracic Society,3 and the BMJ’s own Tobacco Control.4

Critics may argue—as many did when journals stopped publishing cigarette advertisements—that publishing such research does not constitute endorsing its findings and that, as long as funding sources are fully disclosed, readers can consider that information and make up their own minds about the quality of the work. Peer review should prevail, goes this view, the process of scientific publishing and we think that—judging from the examples we have seen—it can work. Peer review should prevail, goes this view, the process of scientific publishing and the companies that now produce modified cigarette products and non-cigarette tobacco products, including electronic nicotine delivery devices (e-cigarettes), are different from the tobacco industry of old, or that the tobacco industry has changed. For ‘hardened’ cigarette smokers who can’t or won’t quit cigarettes,13 the argument goes, new tobacco products could re- produce modiﬁed cigarette products and non-cigarette tobacco products, including electronic nicotine delivery devices (e-cigarettes), are different from the tobacco industry of old, or that the tobacco industry has changed. For ‘hardened’ cigarette smokers who can’t or won’t quit cigarettes,13 the argument goes, new tobacco products could represent potential public health gains, and company-sponsored research may be the first to identify those gains.

But one fact remains unassailably true: the same few multinational tobacco companies continue to dominate the market globally and, as smaller companies develop promising products, they are quickly acquired by the larger ones. However promising any other products might be, tobacco companies are still in the business of marketing cigarettes. As US federal court judge Gladys Kessler pointed out in her judgment in the case of US Department of Justice versus Philip Morris et al, the egregious behaviour of these companies is continuing and is likely to continue into the future.14 And just this summer, documents leaked from one company showed a concerted campaign to ‘ensure that PP [plain packaging of tobacco products, bearing health warnings but only minimal branding] is not adopted in the UK.’15 The tobacco industry has not changed in any fundamental way, and the cigarette—the single most deadly consumer product ever made—remains widely available and aggressively marketed.

Editors of BMJ journals are committed to integrity in scientific publishing and to ensuring that—as far as possible—their journals publish honest work that advances knowledge about health and disease. Back in 2003, the editor of the BMJ defended publication of a study with tobacco industry funding saying ‘The BMJ is passionately antitobacco, but we are also passionately prodebatable and prosaic. A ban would be antiscience.’16 But it is time to cease supporting the now discredited notion that tobacco industry-funded research is just like any other research. Refusing to publish research funded by the tobacco industry affirms our fundamental commitment not to allow our journals to be used in the service of an industry that continues to perpetuate the most deadly disease epidemic of our times.

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