

Tobacco and researchers' rights

Scientists have been wrongly condemned for accepting research sponsorship from the tobacco industry. But there are plenty of ways in which the academic community can be harmed or led astray by cigarette manufacturers.

LIKE schoolchildren caught smoking, two scientists were last week forced to account for themselves before finger-wagging British media. Both had taken research funds from the tobacco industry, whose image as the devil incarnate was recently boosted in the United States by President Bill Clinton, in his classification of tobacco as an addictive drug, and by the courts in damages awarded to a former smoker against Brown and Williamson.

Susan Wonnacott, who works on the effects of nicotine on the brain at the University of Bath's School of Biology and Biochemistry, accepted £100,000 from BAT (British American Tobacco Industries, which are also the owners of Brown and Williamson). Jim Edwardson, head of the Medical Research Council (MRC)'s Neurochemical Pathology Unit in Newcastle upon Tyne received £147,000 from BAT for a study on the potential effect of nicotine on Alzheimer's disease (see page 5). Both say that they accepted the nicotine-tainted money because of a lack of other funds to allow them to continue their research. Wonnacott said she would have preferred not to have taken grants that could be "misconstrued by the public", but otherwise defended her action. Edwardson now says he "regrets" his action as he felt it had raised questions about the impartiality of the MRC whereas this "had to be and absolutely has to be seen to be impartial".

But neither researcher appears to have anything to apologize for. On the contrary, their contracts with BAT provide models for other scientists who collaborate not only with tobacco companies but also with other industrial sponsors or government departments that might be tempted to block or influence publication of research they have funded, or to use it for promotional purposes. Wonnacott's contract with BAT had no strings attached. Better still, Edwardson's contract gave him greater control of the results, containing a gagging clause that prevented BAT from using the results in any form without his permission. Had MRC funded the work, BAT could have used them as it wished.

The significance of that point was illustrated earlier this year, when Philip Morris ran full-page advertisements in European newspapers purporting to show scientific evidence that equated the risks of passive smoking with such innocent activities as "drinking 1 to 2 glasses of whole milk per day" or eating biscuits. The campaign — attacked by many scientists as misleading — was concocted not from research that the company had sponsored, but from figures of "relative risk" that it had extracted from the literature.

The researchers' commendable degree of control over their research results should not be taken for granted. A less circum-spect scientist at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), last year submitted a paper to the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showing that a drug produced by Boots was not better than cheaper alternatives — not quite the outcome preferred by Boots, which had sponsored the research (see *Nature* **381**, 4; 1995). The contract gave Boots a veto on all publications. Not surprisingly, it used it.

Critics of the British researchers' action rightly suspect that tobacco companies no more sponsor research for the love of

science than do companies such as Boots. The tobacco industry has a long history of abusing scientific data, and any benefit of the doubt it ever deserved has long expired. Smoke alarms should ring when tobacco companies defend their motivation for funding research as being "out of a sense of corporate responsibility".

But, as the MRC rightly argues, if one blacklists tobacco companies, where does one stop? Should researchers also boycott the Playboy Foundation, which funds research on AIDS and human sexuality, on the grounds that to accept funds would be to condone soft porn? Or should scientists avoid defence research on the grounds that the companies involved sell arms to developing countries?

The responsibility for deciding which research funds to accept — and under what conditions — should be left primarily to the judgement of individual researchers, under guidelines from their employers that take the experience and interests of their institutions into account, but which avoid prohibitive political correctness.

Other forms of sponsorship, where public relations is the prime objective, are more questionable. Take the recent decision by the University of Cambridge to accept £1.5 million from BAT to pay for a chair in its International Studies Department that will be named after BAT's former chairman, Patrick Sheehy. In doing so, the university is celebrating a man whose legacy is to have increased cigarette exports to developing countries.

Cambridge can rightly argue that no brand name is associated with the chair — a Benson and Hedges chair of international studies would have raised a few eyebrows in Cambridge common rooms — but BAT, which earned more than \$25 billion in cigarette sales last year stands to become associated with one of the world's leading universities at a knock-down price.

Cambridge should have rejected the money. So, in a better world, would the scientists who accept the generous prizes sponsored by Philip Morris in many countries — prizes may look good on CVs, but they are hardly essential to science. Accepting such awards is playing into the hands of the cigarette companies, which are increasingly turning to sponsorship because of restrictions on advertising.

But ultimately, the issues raised by the dealings of the scientific community with the tobacco industry are small compared to the threats to public health and science that stem from the industry's political activities. Some US politicians are in the pocket of the tobacco industry, and pose risks to academic freedom. Tobacco-funded legislators have on several occasions tried to block funding of work by Stanton Glantz, a medical researcher at UCSF, who has revealed links between legislators and tobacco interests and made public damaging internal tobacco industry documents (see *Nature* **382**, 6; 1996).

It is a shame that, by taking millions of dollars from tobacco companies, researchers are doing little to weaken the influence of the industry, or its marketing aimed at developing and not-so-developing countries such as China and Japan. The insatiable appetite for tobacco in those populations is providing a new lifeline for the industry and seems impervious to the signals that research is sending. □