



Article scientifique

Lettre

2016

Published version

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Treating tobacco companies fairly but with no leap of faith

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How to cite

SHAW, David M., ETTER, Jean-François, ELGER, Bernice Simone. Treating tobacco companies fairly but with no leap of faith. In: *Addiction*, 2016, vol. 111, n° 8, p. 1335–1336. doi: 10.1111/add.13427

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:116798>

Publication DOI: [10.1111/add.13427](https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13427)

of these issues and what were the dilemmas they faced (at least one of those invited refused because of such doubts [14])? There are no easy answers to how to deal with the potential threats to science posed by the tobacco industry. Conflicts-of-interest issues also remain difficult more broadly for health research [15].

Awareness-raising and the development of norms in the scientific community will be important, and there appears to be a particular need to discuss the involvement of the tobacco industry in e-cigarettes research and policy debates. The policy debate has been starkly divided [16], and dirty tricks by the tobacco industry could be partly responsible [17]. How to contain the tobacco industry seems to lie somewhere close to the heart of the e-cigarettes debate [18].

Shaw and colleagues [5] suggest that 'extensive scrutiny, above and beyond the traditional peer review process' may be particularly needed for tobacco industry-linked research. There are other questions that might be asked: why publish it, and what does it contribute? Reliance upon self-disclosure over decades has been found to offer little protection of research integrity from the subversive efforts of the tobacco companies, hence the bans on scientific publication of tobacco industry-funded research enacted by other journals [2]. Registries of financial and other disclosures of conflicts of interest that do not rely exclusively upon self-disclosure may offer an additional route to management of a set of problems that are not going to go away. These issues also need further study, informed by what we already know about the tobacco industry, for other industries as well.

Declaration of interests

None.

Keywords Corporate, e-cigarettes, science, scientific misconduct, tobacco industry, research.

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TREATING TOBACCO COMPANIES FAIRLY BUT WITH NO LEAP OF FAITH

McCambridge argues that we are too kind to tobacco companies and that a ban on e-cigarette research associated with them should be extended. Munafo argues we are not critical enough and that a ban is unworkable. We argue that the industry should be treated fairly but cannot be trusted entirely.

We thank Jim McCambridge and Marcus Munafo for their thoughtful responses to our paper. Ironically, the former thinks that we were not critical enough of the tobacco industry and suggests the ban on publishing tobacco-industry funded research should be extended, while the latter thinks that we were overcritical and that the ban is unworkable. We believe that the best solution lies somewhere in between, as suggested in our paper [1–3].

Professor McCambridge argues that we are wrong to claim that tobacco companies have been singled out. In fact, we did not mean that they have been singled out only in comparison with pharmaceutical companies, but also in comparison with companies who manufacture addictive products with alcohol and high sugar content, for example. More importantly, McCambridge suggests that our conclusion—that journals which do not publish research funded by tobacco companies should make no exception in the case of e-cigarette research—does not follow from our analysis, without explaining why he thinks this is the case. However, our conclusion clearly does follow: our paper illustrates how the rationale for not publishing research linked with the tobacco industry also applies in the case of e-cigarette research conducted by the tobacco industry. The rationale itself may be flawed, but criticizing it was not the aim of our paper. Finally, in response to our suggestion that ‘extensive scrutiny, above and beyond the traditional peer review process’ should apply to any e-cigarette research conducted by the tobacco industry, McCambridge asks: ‘why publish it?’ The answer is: ‘because even research conducted by tobacco companies could be of scientific value’. Furthermore, he neglects to mention that our suggestion applied only to those journals without a ban, and we did not mean to suggest that the ban should be lifted.

In contrast to McCambridge, Marcus Munafo argues that a ban is unworkable and open disclosure is the way forward. Whether the ban is workable was not the focus of our paper, but it seems unlikely that simply extending it to e-cigarette research would itself render the current bans unworkable. Munafo is certainly right that there are other conflicts of interest than financial ones, and one of us has addressed this topic elsewhere [4]. Munafo also argues that ‘of 466 [e-cigarette] brands reviewed in 2014, only 10 were owned by the tobacco industry at that point’. However, this poses no problems for our argument, as any research funded by companies not associated by tobacco companies would be unaffected by the ban. Munafo’s suggestion that research would not be published after it was conducted and submitted to a journal because the company that funded it was thereafter purchased by a tobacco company is implausible. Any such cases would be very rare, and journals would probably publish such research with a declaration of a potential conflict of interest, as they would do for any smoking

research conducted by an institution that was then bought by a tobacco company. He concludes that a ‘more pragmatic and open approach, based on full disclosure of potential conflicts of interest’ would be preferable to a ban. However, this argument applies not only to e-cigarette research, but to all research funded by tobacco companies, and is therefore not a valid criticism of our paper. Furthermore, trusting tobacco companies to disclose all conflicts of interest fully would be a rather large leap of faith, given their history of deception, and even full disclosure of conflicts of interests would not, by itself, settle the problem. Greater scrutiny of research reports, with publication of all exchanges between authors and publishers, could be one way forward.

Declaration of interests

J.E.E. was reimbursed by a manufacturer of e-cigarettes to travel to London and to China in 2013 (to visit e-cigarette factories), but he received no honoraria for these meetings, the aim of which was mutual sharing of information. D.S. and B.E. have no conflicts to disclose.

Keywords Ban on industry-funded research, conflicts of interest, e-cigarettes, research integrity.

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