

The Edmonton Journal Story...

The following selection of three letters is not actually in *TobakkoNacht* as I wanted to limit the space devoted to such material, but they speak to an important concern in the field of public policy research concerning tobacco use. I feel the issue is important enough to include all them here even though the first one was the only one to appear in the book itself.

In April of 2007, the *Edmonton Journal* supported the University of Alberta's decision to prohibit its staff from accepting tobacco industry funding. I wrote a response to that editorial and it was published, but then just a few days later they also published a counter-letter from a medical doctor who fairly blatantly accused me of having tobacco funding myself!

It was reasonable for them to publish an attack on my arguments, not so reasonable for them to publish an attack on my integrity, and, I feel, quite *unreasonable* for them to refuse to allow me a space to defend that integrity afterward.

'No-strings' funding from Big Tobacco makes research more impartial – Edmonton Journal –April 9, 2007

Dear Editor,

You state that that the University of Alberta's decision to refuse all tobacco company funding “will enhance the school's reputation as a center of independent research.”

Actually, the opposite is true. Rejecting all studies that would be funded by those supporting one particular view while welcoming funding from those supporting the opposite view can hardly be called “an enhancement of independent research.”

Unless the University wishes to display a shameful lack of ethics, it needs to adopt the same policy for grants from sources publicly devoted to advocating smoking bans, higher taxes on smokers, or any other such goals that would interfere with the true neutrality of its research. It should also insist that no government organization funded by tobacco taxes be allowed to provide grants, since that money comes directly from tobacco sales and since bodies funded by such taxes would clearly be biased against studies supporting tax reduction.

For example, imagine a study examining whether eliminating tobacco taxes might reduce underage smoking by wiping out black market sales that have no ID checks. What financial resource could a researcher at UA now have that would support such an investigation?

Or how about a study whose preliminary data showed an increase in heart attacks after a smoking ban? Does anyone seriously think that a Big Pharma company pocketing multi-mega-millions from NicoGummyPatchyProducts would fund such research?

Research studies are always inherently biased to some degree in their design, subject, data choice, and their ultimate interpretation – all with an eye to pleasing the potential funder. The argument could even be made that “no-strings” grants from Big Tobacco might actually be more impartial than those from advocacy groups that clearly state their grants are meant only to advance the goal of reducing smoking.

This push for universities to ban grants from “politically unacceptable” sources is both scientifically unethical and, in light of history, actually dangerous. Researchers should be free to seek support for their work wherever that search for support might take them; that is the only true way to advance scientific knowledge.

Michael J. McFadden
Author of *Dissecting Antismokers' Brains*
Philadelphia, Pa.

Response to my letter, April 13, 2007

Dear Editor,

Michael J. McFadden is opposed to the U of A banning grants from tobacco companies (" 'No-strings' funding from Big Tobacco makes research...", Letters, April 9).

Mr. McFadden's arguments contain an underlying assumption that universities and society should take a balanced, fair approach to funding science. However, tobacco funding is not fair and balanced. Its primary goal is to increase tobacco consumption. Although similar arguments have been used concerning pharmaceutical-supported research and sales of drugs, their end products are intended to improve human wellbeing. The end products of tobacco companies add to the burden of human misery.

Tobacco research is undertaken worldwide without tobacco company funding. Tobacco research is uniformly negative because the effects of tobacco are uniformly negative. The only "positive" research showed governments may spend less money on smokers because they die prematurely and cannot access seniors' benefits for as many years as non-smokers.

Any time tobacco is discussed, the author must make full disclosure of conflicts of interest. Mr. McFadden did not state his full credentials; he is the mid-Atlantic regional director of the Smoker's Club, Inc. This organization avidly supports the freedom to smoke and finds fault in most anti-smoking legislation. The organization's web site does not declare its funding sources.

Tobacco support groups often receive major funding from tobacco company affiliates. I am not unbiased since I work in the field of adult lung diseases and routinely see the pain and suffering inflicted by tobacco addiction. I suspect that Mr. McFadden is just "blowing smoke" and trying to keep a tobacco presence in all our lives.

Irvin Mayers, MD, Edmonton"

My unpublished response to Dr. Mayers:

Dear Editor,

Dr. Mayers criticized my piece on tobacco research funding largely by indicating that I did not note my completely uncompensated affiliation with a grassroots internet group called The Smokers Club. He was correct in that, but totally incorrect in his implication that I or the Club are supported by tobacco industry money.

My activism, and that of the many other wonderful people I've met and worked with in the Smokers Club, is funded out of our own pockets and small individual contributions. The Club does not have a secret source of "major funding from tobacco industry affiliates."

Unlike the recipients of multi-million dollar grants given to those seeking censorship of smoking in movies or working to deny elderly veterans a smoking room in their nursing homes, those on the smokers' side of the issue usually have no real "competing interests" to declare... other than often being smokers working with other smokers to defend ourselves.

We do not generally have money for extravagant press conferences or even simple press releases. We write our letters and articles on our own time, seeking to get a wider range of information out to a public overwhelmed by thousands of TV ads featuring piles of smokers' dead bodies or happy little children being attacked by "third hand smoke" lurking on their playtoys.

Our power lies in the validity and truth of our statements and information... not in our money.

Michael J. McFadden, Author of "Dissecting Antismokers' Brains"

<http://pasan.TheTruthIsALie.com>

Active in many smokers' rights groups, and Mid-Atlantic Director of the SmokersClub.com, a completely non-compensated position with a completely grassroots non-profit internet newsletter group