



## EDITORIAL

# Towards a total ban on links with the tobacco industry: new rules for the ERS

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### FROM DISCLOSURE TO TOTAL BAN

Tobacco use is one of the greatest preventable causes of premature death and disease in the world. In addition, the interference of the tobacco industry in public health, medical research and public policy has been and continues to be unprecedented, grotesque and unacceptable [1]. The interference is of such a scale that it requires a robust and resolute response [2]. This is why the European Respiratory Society (ERS) has recently assessed its conflict of interest rules and decided to move towards a total ban on links with the tobacco industry.

Conflict of interest policies are now standard practice in the medical world and, although guidelines and procedures may vary, most medical bodies have some form of conflict of interest disclosure policy [3, 4]. However, conflict of interest with the tobacco industry requires more than a disclosure policy [5]. It requires a total ban on relations and this, with some notable exceptions, has been rather rare among medical bodies [5].

### ENDING THE MANIPULATION

In the scientific world, “Big Tobacco” continues to invest strongly in science [6] and is the undeniable leader in organised subterfuge and manipulation of the scientific process [7–9]. The industry has used quasi-scientific organisations and individuals to promote controversy and uncertainty, such as denying for as long as possible the health effects associated with passive smoking [10]. We must view with extreme scepticism funding of scientific research by the tobacco industry. In funding research, the industry seeks not only to manipulate but also acquire credibility. Credibility is essential to their image and to increasing product consumption, influencing public opinion and rallying opposition to effective public health policies [2]. The devious manipulation of science must be met by a firm and radical response, and the cloak of scientific credibility lifted once and for all.

In wider society, the tobacco industry has tried all methods possible (including science) to prevent the development of global, regional and local strategies to combat tobacco [11–13]. Consequently, the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control explicitly warns of the threat posed by the tobacco industry to public health. Furthermore,

the preamble of the convention and the article 5.3 guidelines advise of the need to be very alert to industry efforts to subvert tobacco control [14].

### NEW RULES ON RELATIONSHIPS WITH INDUSTRY

In this light, the ERS has developed new, clear and stringent rules to counteract the threat posed by real or perceived, direct or indirect links to the tobacco industry and to ensure the scientific integrity and independence of the society [15]. These new rules draw a line in the sand, and stipulate the following.

#### **Membership and leadership**

Membership (which includes elected officers) of the society *will not be open* to persons who are, or have been, full or part time employees of, or paid consultants to the tobacco industry, or those with any real or perceived direct or indirect links to the tobacco industry, at any time after January 1, 2000.

#### **Addressing current and past relationships with industry**

The ERS will not accept, at any of its events meetings and/or courses, faculty who are receiving funding from the tobacco industry. Invited faculty will be asked to disclose any funding and/or conflict of interest related to the tobacco industry. In the case of a disclosure of a conflict of interest any time after January 1, 2000 by the person concerned, there will be a 5 year ban from the date of disclosure before that person is allowed to participate actively in an ERS event again. In the case of the discovery of a conflict of interest, which was not disclosed by the person concerned, there *will be a ban for life* from participating actively in any ERS activity, including all ERS publications and scientific and intellectual contributions of any type.

#### **The future: a total ban from 2013**

Any relation to, or funding from, the tobacco industry after January 1, 2013 *will lead to a ban for life* from any ERS activity, including all ERS publications and scientific and intellectual contributions of any type for the person concerned.

It is hoped that the new ERS policy can serve as an inspiration to other medical societies seeking to prevent, as much as possible, the tobacco industry’s continued attempts to manipulate science, researchers and public health policy. Together as a scientific and medical community we must move to a total ban on relations. The recently adopted European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights recalls that “everyone has the right of access to preventive healthcare” [16]. This right must extend to preventing as best we can the influence of a malevolent industry

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from affecting the health of our citizens. In the face of such adversity radical steps are needed. We realise that implementation will be difficult. It will require the utmost honesty and integrity from people and sometimes even sacrifice. However, as a medical society we have a duty to ensure that we do all we can to protect health and curb the epidemic of tobacco.

#### STATEMENT OF INTEREST

Statements of interest for K.F. Rabe, B. Ward and F. Berteletti can be found at [www.erj.ersjournals.com/site/misc/statements.xhtml](http://www.erj.ersjournals.com/site/misc/statements.xhtml)

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