Tobacco industry update: International tactics still a smoking gun

The annual death toll from tobacco products is five million people worldwide. One million deaths alone occur in the Americas.

Massive, antismoking advertising campaigns have made it clear, to North Americans at least: smoking is the number one—and most preventable—cause of illness and death in the industrialized world.

Not everyone, however, has the luxury of such government-sponsored warnings. According to a new report reminiscent of Hollywood's blockbuster The Insider, "some unfortunate world regions remain victim to heavy tobacco industry propaganda." "Profits over People," a report released by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) in December 2002, reveals how multinational tobacco companies have acted deceptively in Latin America and the Caribbean over the past 10 years.

A team investigated upwards of 10,000 pages of internal tobacco company documents, primarily from Phillip Morris and British American Tobacco, two companies that dominate the market in those geographic areas. Researchers found tobacco companies hired "independent" consultants to misrepresent the science linking second-hand smoke and disease.

Further, purported "youth smoking prevention" campaigns ran simultaneously with cigarette ads, a contradictory strategy that was part of a PR plan to help prevent implementation of more meaningful tobacco marketing regulations. Using government connections and devious marketing tactics, tobacco companies effectively weakened or killed tobacco control regulations.

"Profits over People" authors Biolous and Shatenstein note how the tobacco industry's united front doesn't match their closed-door concerns. For example, while the companies publicly deny the connection between smoking initiation and advertising, they internally acknowledge that advertising bans threaten tobacco sales, and thus attempt to counteract any proposed regulatory actions to that effect.

Here in Canada, tobacco sales have been negatively affected by promotion bans, increased tobacco taxes, and the growing number of both voluntary and mandatory smoke-free environments. These same measures, the report notes, could help fight tobacco industry control in Latin America and the Caribbean. "The tobacco companies' internal discussions confirm that these are the measures that affect tobacco use the most," notes PAHO director Dr. George Alleyne.

The tobacco industry remains a public health threat—a fitting reminder for April, cancer month. The annual death toll from tobacco products is five million people worldwide. One million deaths alone occur in the Americas. An estimated 47,000 Canadians died from tobacco-related diseases in 2000, reports Statistics Canada.

Smoking is responsible for about 90 per cent of lung cancer cases and the majority of mouth and throat cancers, according to the US Surgeon General. Other risks of smoking—and second-hand smoke—include high blood pressure, slowed wound healing, heart disease, and increased risk of osteoporosis. Related health-care costs are astronomical.

Fortunately, domestic trends show that awareness campaigns have translated into declining smoking rates. Between 1985 and 1999, the percentage of Canadians aged 15 and older who smoked dropped an overall 10.3 per cent, to 27 per cent of men and 23 per cent of women. After rising in the early 1990s, smoking in youth dropped six per cent from 1994-95 to 2001 (28.5 to 22.5).

Currently seven million Canadians smoke. Continued antismoking efforts should be made to counter tobacco industry influence, both domestically and internationally. 

"Profits Over People," a report released by the Pan American Health Organization in December 2002, is available at paho.org/English/HPP/HPM/TOH/profits_over_people.htm.