

Tobacco companies obstructed science, history professor says

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"Doubt is our product," stated a tobacco industry memo from 1969. For half a century, the tobacco industry tried to muddy the link between smoking and cancer. Now, with that effort long since failed, cigarette producers facing dozens of potentially ruinous lawsuits are once again attempting to manufacture doubt.

"The tobacco industry is now trying to win their cases by rewriting history, saying that everyone knew but no one had proof," said Robert N. Proctor, a professor of history at Stanford. "What they're saying is that everyone always knew it was bad for you. So if you started smoking in 1962 or 1972 and later got lung cancer, you have only yourself to blame."

Proctor spoke Feb. 18 during a symposium-"The Sociopolitical Manufacturing of Scientific Ignorance"-at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in San Francisco.

Proctor claims that by the middle of the 1950s there was a scientific consensus that smoking caused lung cancer. But the tobacco industry fought that finding, both in the public eye and within the scientific community. Tobacco companies funded skeptics, started health reassurance campaigns, ran advertisements in medical journals and researched alternate explanations for lung cancer, such as pollution, asbestos and even the keeping of birds. Denying the case against tobacco was "closed," they called for more research as a tactic to delay regulation.

Drawing from his experiences as an expert witness in tobacco litigation cases, Proctor says that industry lawyers often claim that "government propaganda," such as warnings from the Surgeon General, was so overwhelming that the risks of smoking were universally known. But they excuse the industry's own counter-propaganda by arguing that the scientific community was unable to prove a link between smoking and lung cancer until relatively recently. If true, this lack of proof would absolve the tobacco companies of any blame for deaths caused by smoking and any charges of fraud for their campaign against the link between cancer and cigarettes.

"But if they were lying and if people actually believed their lies," Proctor said, "then the industry can be held liable because they were manufacturing a defective and fraudulent product."

Proctor has used poll results stretching back to the 1940s to show that in fact some people were ignorant of the risks. "Millions of people in the '60s, '70s and '80s didn't know that tobacco caused lung cancer or heart disease," Proctor said. "An increasing number knew, but not everyone knew. And not everyone knew because the industry was manufacturing doubt, fomenting ignorance. Industry executives created a climate of untruth that people bought into and died from."

Proctor also has delved into the phone logs and correspondence records of tobacco companies to look at what consumers were thinking. "Even in the 1970s and '80s, lots of people are writing letters to the industry saying, 'The government is brainwashing me into thinking tobacco is bad, whereas I have a grandmother who lived to be 82 and she smokes, and I've smoked for years and I'm still healthy.'"

In an age when nearly everyone knows that smoking causes cancer, it might not seem important to study the ways the tobacco companies sowed doubt. But Big Tobacco's methods have since been exported to

other industries. At the same symposium, University of California-San Diego history and science studies Professor Naomi Oreskes will discuss a similar topic in a talk titled "Confounding Science: The Tobacco Road to Global Warming," and journalist Paul Thacker will give a talk titled "Thank You for Polluting: How Campaigns to Create Scientific Confusion Kill Product Regulation."

How can tactics like these undermine the work of so many scientists? Proctor said: "There's a saying in the PR business that for every PhD there's an equal and opposite PhD. And if there's not one then you can create one through funding. And if you put a lot of money into manufacturing ignorance, it can actually work.

"We saw this in tobacco, and we've seen it in polluting industries and global warming," he added. "There are lots of people out there who'd rather have you not know what's really going on."

Source: Stanford University

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