Lighting up the powerful global smoking lobby

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Global public health efforts to reduce smoking are at odds with the interests of the tobacco industry. According to a case study published in the online open access journal *Globalization and Health*, competing tobacco companies co-operate via a global network of national and regional manufacturing associations to undermine public health measures to counter smoking.

Patricia McDaniel, Gina Intinarelli and Ruth Malone from the University of California, San Francisco dug deep into documentary data from tobacco industry documents archives. Their case study, which maps globally tobacco industry-linked groups known as "issues management organizations," draws upon previously secret tobacco industry documents and details some of the strategies these bodies used.

The International Committee on Smoking Issues (ICOSI) was formed in 1977 by seven tobacco company chief executives to create common anti-tobacco control strategies and build a global network of regional and national manufacturing associations. Later renamed INFOTAB, multinational companies built the organization rapidly: by 1984, it had 69 members operating in 57 countries.

According to the authors, INFOTAB material, including position papers and "action kits" helped members challenge local tobacco control measures and maintain tobacco-friendly environments. In 1992 INFOTAB was replaced by two smaller organizations: The Tobacco Documentation Centre, which continues to operate, distributes smoking-

related information and industry argumentation to members, some produced by cross-company committees. Agro-Tobacco Services, and now Hallmark Marketing Services, assists the INFOTAB-backed and industry supported International Tobacco Growers Association in promoting tobacco's economic importance in developing nations.

"Policymakers should be aware that although these associations claim to represent only national or regional interests, they are allied to and coordinated with a confederation of trans-national tobacco companies seeking to protect profits by undermining public health," says Ruth Malone. "Cigarette manufacturers and their attorneys played the biggest role. Under their explicit direction, INFOTAB set policies and crafted strategies that ensured that the global tobacco community spoke and acted as one."

Tobacco is the second major cause of death worldwide, with 84% of smokers living in developing and transitional economy countries. Litigation against the tobacco industry led to the public release of over 47 million pages of internal industry documents housed in paper depositories and online electronic archives.

Source: BioMed Central