

# Anti-tobacco conference struggles to stub out lobbyists

October 18 2014, by Anais Llobet

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A major conference aimed at cutting global smoking rates in Moscow this week found itself grappling with another issue: how to stop the powerful tobacco lobby from butting in on the debate.

While delegates at the World Health Organization gathering were discussing ways to stop people lighting up, those representing the interests of the [tobacco industry](#) were doing their best to influence the outcome.

Officially, lobbyists were banned from attending the week-long gathering that involved government representatives from some 190 countries. But they still made their presence felt on the sidelines—and sometimes even inside the conference hall itself.

That led those in charge to sound the warning alarm over any attempts to derail the talks that included discussions on raising taxes, proposals the industry is desperately trying to stub out.

"The [cigarette manufacturers](#) insist on being an integral part of the debate to find solutions," WHO director Margaret Chan told the roughly 1500 delegates.

"But allowing a place for the tobacco industry would be the same as letting the foxes look after the chickens," Chan said. "Don't let them seduce you."

International officials at the biennial conference discussed—and eventually agreed—guidelines for taxes they hope will help stop a habit blamed for some six million deaths each year.

But some from the tobacco lobby turned a deaf ear to the trenchant warnings from organisers and snuck into the conference in the area reserved for members of the public.

Francois van der Merwe, from the International Tobacco Growers Association, woke up at 6am to snatch his seat but was then among a group of lobbyists turfed out after a vote by the delegates.

"We don't need these members of the public here," said the Ugandan delegate Sheila Ndyanabangi.

Van der Merwe though argued that it was wrong to kick him out.

"I represent thirty million farmers. Is it right that they expel me while they decide my future?" he huffed to AFP.

For anti-smoking activists the spat was part of a long-standing push by the multi-billion dollar industry to try to stamp out any curbs on their business.

"These places are almost all snapped up by people who work for the tobacco industry and who walk the halls every day to convince delegates not to vote on tobacco control measures," said Jesse Bragg, spokesman for Corporate Accountability International.

## **Sideline meetings**

While the lobbyists may have been chucked out of the conference itself that did not stop them setting up meetings on the sidelines to try to get

their point of view across.

Persona non grata Van der Merwe arranged a lunch for eight handpicked journalists to hear his views.

Meanwhile, the International Tax and Investment Centre, a group financed by the big four cigarette producers, organised a conference in Moscow on the eve of the WHO summit and invited all the delegate along.

"We had to send around a note out explaining that it was not one of our meetings and encouraging delegates not to visit it," said one of the organisers of the anti-tobacco event.

"We had suspicions about interference by the pro-tobacco lobby at our conference."

The major cigarette manufacturers have blasted the moves to exclude them from the talks, with a spokeswoman for Philip Morris calling them a "flagrant violation" of the meeting's commitments to public debate.

For anti-tobacco activists, however, keeping the industry lobbyists out of the discussion was much-needed.

"WHO is facing a challenge: how to ensure the transparency of our conference without allowing the tobacco industry to participate because they use the same desire for transparency to threaten the whole process," said Bragg, spokesman for Corporate Accountability International.

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