

17 universities oppose anti-smoking group with tobacco ties

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In this Oct. 27, 2015, file photo, a University of Washington student discards a cigarette into a container at a designated smoking locations on the campus in Seattle. Seventeen public health schools in the U.S. and Canada have pledged to

refuse research money from a new anti-smoking group funded by the tobacco industry. Deans of public health schools at Harvard, Johns Hopkins and a dozen other schools said Thursday, Jan. 25, 2018, that the group is too closely tied to an industry that sells harmful products. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, File)

Seventeen public health schools in the U.S. and Canada pledged Thursday to refuse research money from a new anti-smoking group funded by the tobacco industry.

The Foundation for a Smoke-Free World was created in September with nearly \$1 billion from the Philip Morris tobacco company, saying it aims to end smoking worldwide and support research to meet that goal.

But deans of public health schools at Harvard, Johns Hopkins and other universities said the group is too closely tied to an industry that sells deadly products to millions.

"The idea of taking money that's from the tobacco industry is just antithetical to everything we do," said Karen Emmons, dean for academic affairs at Harvard's public health school. "Philip Morris in particular has focused very hard to undermine the strategies that we know will reduce smoking rates."

Derek Yach, president of the foundation, said it's "disappointing, and a loss for smokers" that the deans won't work with the group.

"We share the same goals: To improve public health and urgently advocate for more funding and better science to help millions of smokers reduce their risk of death and disease," Yach said in a statement.

He added that Philip Morris has "absolutely no involvement, influence or control" over the foundation, and urged the deans to reconsider.

Officials at Philip Morris, the makers of Marlboro and other cigarette brands, declined to comment for this story.

The foundation has yet to issue research grants but said it has received draft proposals and will make funding decisions after a series of meetings scheduled to be held in February.

A statement signed by the 17 deans and first released to The Associated Press says that if Philip Morris wants to end smoking, it should stop selling and advertising cigarettes.

"Further, both the tobacco industry and Philip Morris International have a long history of funding 'research' in ways meant to purposely confuse the public and advance their own interests," the statement says.

Others signing the pledge include leaders of public health schools at Florida International University, the University of Minnesota, Ohio State University, Tulane University and the University of Alberta in Canada.

The foundation said it will pay for research that helps smokers quit, helps tobacco farmers find other livelihoods and develops "reduced-risk" alternatives to traditional cigarettes.

But some critics fear the foundation will try to produce research promoting some of those alternatives, including a new electronic device called the iQOS (pronounced EYE'-kose) that Philip Morris hopes to market in the U.S.

"This strategy fits into their business model," said Emmons, at Harvard. "But right now we don't really know if these alternatives are safer. There

just isn't the evidence base."

After the foundation was announced Sept. 13, it quickly drew scorn from the World Health Organization, which says it won't work with the group and accused it of having "a number of clear conflicts of interest."

Yach, who is a former executive of the World Health Organization, responded in a letter insisting that the group is "fully insulated" from industry influence.

But leaders of the public health schools questioned the group's independence, writing that its money is "equivalent to funding from the tobacco industry."

"There is a fundamental contradiction in what they are doing," said Dr. Pierre Buekens, dean of Tulane's public health school. "Until we know more, we are not prepared to accept funding from the foundation."

Amid the debate, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration says it's working on a new plan that would drastically cut nicotine levels in cigarettes so they would essentially be non-addictive. For those who don't quit, the plan would allow lower-risk products that deliver nicotine without the deadly effects of combustible cigarettes.

Ellen MacKenzie, dean of Johns Hopkins University's public health school, said the possibility of forthcoming regulation makes it even more important for schools to be cautious about funding sources.

"This is an especially critical time for tobacco control efforts," said MacKenzie, who organized the statement from the public health schools. "Thoughtful, independent academic research will be essential to guide policy."

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