

Battle for lungs and minds as tobacco control treaty meeting opens

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A meeting on a global tobacco control treaty opened in Geneva Monday, with organisers scrambling to keep cigarette companies at bay, even as the industry demanded a seat at the table.

Two dramatically different views on the best way forward in reining in smoking were on display, with organisers and activists maintaining the [tobacco](#) companies had nothing to offer, and the [industry](#) insisting its [new products](#) are key to halting a smoking epidemic that causes some seven million deaths each year.

"This is not a time to be complacent," Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva, who heads the secretariat of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), said as delegates from 137 countries gathered to discuss the treaty.

"With astronomical budgets, the tobacco industry continues its furious efforts to undermine the implementation of our treaty"

The eighth meeting of the parties to the convention since it took effect in 2005 is expected this week to focus heavily on efforts to limit influence by Big Tobacco on the proceedings.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus described the convention Monday as "one of the greatest public health achievements in the past 20 years".

And the FCTC hailed "significant progress" in many of its 181 country parties in implementing the requirements of the treaty, including in creating smoke-free areas and banning advertising for [tobacco products](#).

'Industry interference'

But, it cautioned, "tobacco industry interference, combined with the emergence of new and novel tobacco products, continues to be considered the most serious barrier to the implementation of the Convention."

In a bid to limit their influence, tobacco company representatives are barred from the conference, while delegates, observers and the media are asked to sign forms disclosing any connections to the tobacco industry.

Yet AFP spoke with several tobacco company executives who said they accessed the public gallery Monday to observe the proceedings.

The companies insist they should at least be allowed in the room.

"This is not about influencing, this is about presenting our view," said Michiel Reerink, the vice president of regulatory strategy at Japan Tobacco International (JTI), and one of the industry executives who observed the public opening of Monday's meeting.

"It is our industry and our products that are the subject of the debate."

"We believe we should be part of the conversation," Moira Gilchrist, Philip Morris International (PMI)'s vice president of scientific and public communications, told reporters Monday.

She was speaking at a Geneva hotel not far from the convention centre, where PMI has set up a stand to show off its portfolio of so-called harm-reduction products, including e-cigarettes and heated tobacco sticks, to delegates.

PMI and other companies say such products are far less dangerous than traditional cigarettes, and insist they are key to helping move smokers unable to quit completely over to "safer" alternatives.

They would like the FCTC and policymakers to embrace the new products, and are calling for less taxation and the right to promote them as less harmful than combustible cigarettes.

Da Costa e Silva of the FCTC told AFP last month that, in light of the tobacco industry's history of lying about the health impact of their products, she did not trust their claims.

"They said the same thing when they released filters for tobacco products, that this would be healthier products," she said.

"You can't trust what the tobacco industry says."

'Cynicism'

Activists also balk at the industry claims.

"They're saying: we created this gigantic problem... and when you're hooked, we will sell you the solution," Francis Thompson, who heads the Framework Convention Alliance, told AFP.

"There is a certain cynicism involved in that."

John Stewart of Corporate Accountability also questioned the science behind the claims, stressing that "I haven't seen any evidence that was not funded by the [tobacco industry](#)."

On the other side of the aisle, a group of 72 scientists and policy experts signed an open letter to Tedros Monday asking that WHO and FCTC "embrace tobacco harm reduction", insisting the new products "offer the prospect of significant and rapid public health gains."

PMI chief executive Andre Calantzopoulos meanwhile likened the debate on nicotine to the one that raged decades ago around how to combat HIV.

"At that time, one side argued for complete abstinence, while others took

the more pragmatic approach that condoms were a more realistic and effective approach for the real world," he said in an email.

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