

Tobacco firms invest billions in medical products: Call for journals to ban research by the firms, their subsidiaries

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Tobacco-funded research is still appearing in highly-cited medical journals—despite attempts by some to cut ties altogether, finds an investigation by The Investigative Desk and *The BMJ* today.

Although the [tobacco industry](#) has a long history of subverting science, most leading medical journals don't have policies that ban research wholly or partly funded by the industry. And even when publishers, authors and universities are willing to restrict tobacco industry ties, they struggle to identify funding sources because tobacco companies have funded front groups and have diversified into pharmaceutical and health technology fields.

These investments include treatments for conditions caused or aggravated by smoking, such as lung cancer, heart disease, and asthma.

These ties complicate ongoing efforts of researchers, [scientific organizations](#) and journals to distance themselves from the industry and have led to calls for journals to not only institute bans on research by tobacco companies but also on their subsidiaries.

The Investigative Desk and *The BMJ* searched the PubMed database and found hundreds of relationships between Big Tobacco's medical and pharmaceutical subsidiaries and [medical research](#). They also checked the tobacco policies of 10 leading general [medical journals](#) and 10 journals in each of the three therapeutic areas especially affected by smoking.

Of those 40 journals, only 8 (20%) had policies prohibiting studies

wholly or partly funded by the tobacco industry. Of the 10 journals in the field of respiratory medicine, six had a tobacco policy, but in oncology only one did, and in cardiology, none had one. Among the 10 general medicine journals, only *The BMJ* had such a policy.

But even among the journals that have a policy, enforcement can be difficult when it involves subsidiaries or organizations associated with the tobacco companies. Last year, one of *BMJ* Group's titles, *BMJ Open*, retracted a paper after it became clear that the listed funder receives sponsorship from the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, a group supported and fully funded by tobacco company Philip Morris International (PMI).

Dutch researcher Wytse van den Bosch had a research grant from pharmaceutical company Vectura when the company was bought by PMI in 2021. Nevertheless, his study was still published in a European Respiratory Society (ERS) journal, which said the research was not in breach of its policy as the grant from Vectura was initiated in 2018.

Ruth Malone, professor of social behavioral sciences at the University of California and former editor-in-chief of *BMJ* Group's *Tobacco Control* journal, said that institutions, professionals and scientific journals should refuse involvement with the tobacco industry.

"Anyone who understands the history, extent and nature of the epidemic and the tobacco industry's strategic efforts to divide the public health community knows that industry money should be rejected," she says.

Nicholas Hopkinson, professor of respiratory medicine at Imperial College London, notes that given the industry's "long-standing history of dishonesty," it is "very straightforward" that researchers should cut ties to companies after they are acquired by big tobacco, as otherwise they would be "working with the tobacco industry" and contribute to their

profits.

Today, *BMJ* also updates its 2013 tobacco policy. In addition to excluding research funded by the tobacco industry, *BMJ* journals will also exclude work where authors have personal financial ties to the tobacco industry.

"The updated [policy](#) is one action *BMJ* journals can take to reduce the publication of content which downplays the harms of smoking or hinders the creation of a world free from the harms of smoking," explain the editors. "Creating a stronger firewall between the tobacco industry and *BMJ* content will provide space for editors to curate and publish content that is more independent and trusted, and contributes to a healthier world."

More information: Tobacco funded research: how even journals with bans find it hard to stem the tide of publications, *The BMJ* (2024). [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.q1153](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.q1153)

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