

The Tobacco Industry and Scientific Groups ILSI: A Case Study

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Executive Summary:

A July 2000 report of an independent committee of experts outlined a number of ways in which the tobacco industry had attempted to undermine WHO tobacco control efforts in recent decades. One such method of subverting tobacco control involved the industry's funding of and involvement in seemingly unbiased scientific groups to manipulate political and scientific debate concerning tobacco and health. This paper presents a brief chronology of the industry's relations with one such group, the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), between 1983 and 1998. Findings indicate that ILSI was used by certain tobacco companies to thwart tobacco control policies. Senior office bearers in ILSI were directly involved in these actions.

Introduction:

In July, 2000, an independent committee of experts issued a report addressing the efforts of the tobacco industry to undermine tobacco control initiatives of the World Health Organization (WHO).¹ Information in the report, based upon thousands of industry documents released as a condition of United States tobacco lawsuit settlements, revealed that tobacco companies had engaged in deliberate subversion of WHO tobacco control objectives through, *inter alia*, using outside organizations, such as tobacco-company created front-groups, as well as legitimately established scientific groups, to influence WHO decision-making and to manipulate scientific debate surrounding the health effects of tobacco.² Control of such groups played a crucial role in the industry's strategy to prevent tobacco control from taking priority on the WHO agenda.

The International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) is a key scientific group which the tobacco industry sought to control during the public and scientific debate concerning

environmental tobacco smoke. ILSI is a worldwide foundation which aims to “advance the understanding of scientific issues related to nutrition, food safety, toxicology, and the environment” through the exchange of ideas and information between scientists from various backgrounds: academia, government, industry, and the private sector.³ ILSI headquarters are located in Washington, D.C., with branch offices throughout the world.⁴ Current public health issues on the ILSI agenda include the role of nutrition in human health, the safety of food ingredients and additives, food-related allergies, safe water and air, chemical safety and environmental health, and the identification and assessment of human health and ecological risks.⁵

ILSI primarily uses sponsored research, workshops, conferences, educational projects, and publications to increase awareness about its scientific research and viewpoints. The organization enjoys nongovernmental status with the WHO and specialized consultative status with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations.⁶ Additionally, ILSI works closely with two WHO groups: the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and the International Programme on Chemical Safety (IPCS).⁷ The Tobacco Industry Document Report outlines Philip Morris’ intense campaign to influence IARC studies on Environmental Tobacco Smoke.⁸

This paper examines many of the tobacco industry documents establishing political and financial connections with ILSI and concludes that ILSI has enjoyed a long and serious collaboration with the tobacco industry. The information comes primarily from the Philip Morris⁹ and R.J. Reynolds¹⁰ tobacco company document sites. Over 700 documents from these websites reference ILSI conferences, publications, and communications between the years 1983 and 1998.

Chronology:

The earliest tobacco website documents demonstrate that tobacco industry involvement with ILSI had been established by the early 1980’s. The first reference to ILSI among the released Minnesota Settlement documents occurs in 1983, mentioning current R.J.

Reynolds membership and activities in technical associations, including ILSI, as constituting one example of the research activities which could benefit from the centralized activity of a Corporate Research Center.¹¹ Philip Morris representatives attended a European Toxicology Forum meeting in October of that year.¹² A 1984 R.J. Reynolds report on resource management points out the necessity of maintaining an active liaison with the ILSI project officer.¹³

In August of 1985, Dr. Francis Roe of Philip Morris wrote a brief report of the proceedings from the International Congress of Nutrition, including a description of a speech given by Alex Malaspina (then-president of ILSI and also vice-president of Coca Cola) on the organization's activities.¹⁴ A few months later, Dr. Roe corresponded with Dr. Ulrich Mohr of Medizinische Hochschule Hannover, discussing the content of the ILSI International Symposium on the Design, Conduct, and Interpretation of Inhalation Studies.¹⁵ In response to Dr. Mohr's request for comments on a proposed list of topics, Dr. Roe suggested eliminating clinical or epidemiological evidence from the discussion and stated that he hoped to be involved in "some way" in the symposium.

A 1986 interoffice correspondence from Philip Morris containing minutes of a Strategic Issues Committee meeting demonstrated that Philip Morris officials were concerned about a lack of focus and organization in ILSI activities, a problem attributed to ILSI president Dr. Alex Malaspina. (then Vice President of Coca Cola)¹⁶ These problems were apparently resolved by 1989, when a handwritten note regarding Dr. Malaspina's desire to meet with senior management outlined the necessity of supporting an individual who could set the agenda a meetings, arrange for ILSI to co-sponsor meetings, enhance Philip Morris credibility, and establish third party links between ILSI and WHO.¹⁷ In exchange, the note suggested, Philip Morris would provide Dr. Malaspina's organization with the money it desired.

This tactic would apparently complement Philip Morris' hope to use ILSI in execution of an industry strategy to attack the scientific basis of ETS accusations through ILSI's risk assessment symposium and through its inhalation toxicology studies.¹⁸ Philip Morris

hoped to use the organization's scientific credibility as a mechanism to shift the focus on ETS from a political to a scientific issue.¹⁹ Dr. Roe's appraisal of an ILSI-sponsored symposium on the assessment of inhalation hazards held in Hannover, Germany in early 1989²⁰ emphasized that as a "future consideration", Philip Morris should exploit the discussion of ETS in such a forum, implying that ILSI provided the tobacco industry an ideal mechanism to influence scientific discourse on ETS.²¹ A memo three months later lists a possible strategy as "consider sponsoring ILSI to undertake meetings on ETS related issues"; a handwritten note on the same page indicates that the the development of an "ETS tracking system" to monitor Philip Morris' political contributions, donations to minority constituencies, and anti-ETS activities is "right up PM's alley".²²

In December of 1987, ILSI-President Dr. Malaspina arranged to bring three executives from R.J. Reynolds to the office of Dr. Laney, President of Emory University.²³ The executives were interested in providing funding for research at Emory Medical School and in presenting a smokeless cigarette to Emory cancer research experts. RJR files from the same time contained a confidentiality contract with Dr. Malaspina, enabling RJR to discuss a new product with him.²⁴ Dr. Malaspina also developed ties with Philip Morris; in April of 1989, he wrote to Dr. Thomas Borelli, manager of scientific issues at Philip Morris, to request a visit to Philip Morris headquarters regarding a new ILSI division called Health and Environmental Sciences.²⁵

California Proposition 65, the Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act of 1986, drew considerable attention from R.J. Reynolds, at least partially for its potential restrictions on environmental tobacco smoke. The company held a meeting in July 1987 specifically addressing the scientific aspects of Proposition 65, aiming to explore the possibility of the ILSI Nutrition Foundation and the ILSI Risk Science Institute developing position documents and providing additional scientific input to the California Health and Welfare Agency and to the Governor's Scientific Advisory Panel.²⁶ A memo from Dr. Malaspina to ILSI members describing the meeting contains a handwritten note, warning to "keep an eye on these activities".²⁷ ILSI continued to keep its members updated on Proposition 65 progress and related ILSI-activities through the next few

months,²⁸ and in October provided three thousand dollars in order to support two ILSI-NF projects concerning proposition 65.²⁹ In February of 1988, R.J. Reynolds agreed to be a member of an independent scientific committee convened by ILSI-NF in order to further developmental toxicity evaluation criteria to be used in the implementation of Proposition 65.³⁰

A Memo dated November 27, 1989 from Tom Borelli to Jack Nelson regarding ETS issues discussed the National Cancer Institute's displeasure with ILSI's toxicology forum.³¹ NCI had apparently threatened to remove itself from the toxicology forum advisory committee if Philip Morris became a member. In response, the writer suggested "it is time to move with the PM Co Inc strategy for sponsorship of outside groups (remember the proposal I wrote). Of course that would raise the stakes of forcing these groups to accept PM and I guess they could choose to keep us out. But then they go broke..." A 1990 outline listing plan of action for the tobacco industry lists "consider involvement in ILSI" as a specific goal for industry organization".³²

A 1991 outline of planned Philip Morris responses to the problem of ETS shows a strategy which includes participation in all ETS conferences, including EPA/ILSI presentations on risks from inhaled mixtures.³³ Another 1991 internal document lists under "industry organization – goals" to "consider involvement with ILSI".³⁴

A 1993 ILSI invoice for a forty thousand dollar payment FROM Mr. Steven Parrish, Vice President and General Counsel of Philip Morris USA, listed rendered services as including "(1) revised meta-analysis white paper covering ETS and EMF and accompanying cover letter for review by ILSI officials (2) Held telephone discussions with ILSI officials...wrote memo regarding the status of the ILSI project, and (3) Met with ILSI official to discuss planned meta-analysis workshop, discussed composition of planning committee for the workshop, briefed client on results of meeting, preliminary timetable, and possible members of planning committee".³⁵

Financial support which the industry has provided to ILSI has been considerable in the past, and may continue to be so. R.J. Reynolds pledged thirty thousand dollars to support the 5th ILSI-sponsored International Inhalation Symposium, held in 1994.³⁶ A 1998 letter from Dr. Ulrich Mohr to Dr. Carchman, Director of Scientific Affairs, Philip Morris USA, provides information about ILSI-organized and sponsored biennial international conferences on inhalation toxicology, and requested sponsorship of Philip Morris for the next symposium.³⁷

While it is appropriate for tobacco company-owned food subsidiaries to sponsor nutrition of food science research with groups like ILSI, it is of great concern when tobacco companies use these same groups to undermine tobacco control efforts. This review of documents indicates that an NGO in official relations with WHO to further the commercial interests of tobacco companies. This is contrary to the principles governing relations between WHO and NGOs and warrants investigation by the Executive Board. This is especially urgent in light of the recommendations of the Committee of Experts on Tobacco Industry Documents and the fact that Alex Malaspina was a member of PAHO's Development Committee at the same time as Paul Dietrich. The Committee provided strong evidence of Dietrich's interaction with tobacco companies.

¹ Report of the Committee of Experts on Tobacco Industry Documents, TOBACCO COMPANY STRATEGIES TO UNDERMINE TOBACCO CONTROL ACTIVITIES AT THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (July 2000).

² *Id.*, at 3.

³ See <http://www.ilsa.org/aboutilsa.html> (last visited December 26, 2000)

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ See Report, *supra* note I, at 16.

⁹ <http://www.pmdocs.com>

¹⁰ <http://www.rjrtdocs.com>

¹¹ RJR 2 (1983)

¹² PM 1000146699 (10/18/1983)

¹³ RJR 3

¹⁴ PM 8/21/1985

¹⁵ PM 2001219985 (11/15/1985)

¹⁶ PM (12/03/1986)

¹⁷ PM 202115937 (1989)

¹⁸ PM 202115947 (1989)

¹⁹ PM 202115934 (1989)

²⁰ February 19-24, 1989 "Assessment of Inhalation Hazards: Integration and Extrapolation Using Diverse Data". Held February 19-24, 1989 at Hannover Medical School, Hannover, Federal Republic of Germany.

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- ²¹ PM 202162817 (2/27/1989)
 - ²² PM 2021159481 (5/01/1989)
 - ²³ RJR 12/01/1987
 - ²⁴ RJR 12/15/1987
 - ²⁵ PM 4/20/1989

- ²⁶ RJR 183 (2/22/1988)
- ²⁷ PM 2024255219 (12/27/1989)
- ²⁸ PM 2021183646 (1990)
- ²⁹ PM 2021181794 (1991)
- ³⁰ PM 2022885406 (1/1991)
- ³¹ PM 20023593676 (6/1993)
- ³² RJR 236
- ³³ PM 1998