STATEMENT BY PROFESSOR THOMAS ZELTNER,
CHAIRMAN OF THE EXPERT COMMITTEE ON THE
REPORT ON TOBACCO INDUSTRY DOCUMENTS AND THE
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

In October 1999, Dr Brundtland appointed a committee of experts to research whether and to what extent tobacco companies have attempted to undermine WHO policies on tobacco control and its funding. I was asked to chair this committee. Additional members included David Kessler, Dean of the School of Medicine at Yale University, Anke Martiny who was nominated by the President of the World Bank and is head of Transparency International in Germany, and Fazel Randera, currently Inspector General of Intelligence Services in South Africa and previously a member of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. We were assisted by eight outside researchers.

Over the past months we have reviewed once confidential, now publicly available tobacco company documents and interviewed a limited number of individuals to clarify information found in the documents.

The documents reveal that tobacco companies viewed WHO as one of their leading enemies, and that they saw themselves in battle with WHO. The documents show that tobacco companies fought WHO’s tobacco control agenda by, among other things, staging events to divert attention from public health issues raised by tobacco use, attempting to reduce budgets for tobacco control, pitting other UN agencies against WHO, seeking to convince developing countries that WHO’s tobacco control program was a “First World” agenda carried out at the expense of the developing world, distorting the results of important scientific studies on tobacco, and discrediting WHO as an institution.

Our 246 page report is supported by detailed documentary evidence and is available on WHO’s home page (http://www.who.int). The document offers specific examples of many tobacco industry strategies. It starts by outlining development of the “Boca Raton Action Plan,” by Philip Morris, a comprehensive strategy document for the year 1989. The plan aimed, among other goals, to attack WHO’s tobacco control programs, influencing the priorities of the regional offices, and targeting the structure, management and resources of WHO.

Case studies are provided that indicate how the tobacco companies sought to influence the outcomes of World Health Assemblies as well as the UN Economic and Social Council; recruit independent critics who were paid by the tobacco companies to further their aims; influence the standard setting processes of WHO and FAO in relation to pesticides; prevent a major study on the impact of environmental tobacco smoke on health-and manipulate the public and regulatory response to the study.

The evidence shows that tobacco companies have operated for many years with the deliberate purpose of subverting the efforts of WHO to control tobacco. The attempted subversion has been elaborate, well financed, sophisticated and usually invisible.

In developing recommendations we are aware that most of our evidence covers a period that precedes the development by Dr Brundtland of the Tobacco Free Initiative
and the ensuing accelerated work on tobacco control that WHO has spearheaded. However, it is likely that tobacco companies will attempt to defeat the proposed Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, or to transform the proposal into a vehicle for weakening national tobacco control initiatives. Based upon past experience, such a campaign is likely to be sophisticated and sustained, and to use tactics similar to those described in this report. We therefore recommend that WHO develop a communications strategy to counter any campaign of opposition by tobacco companies. Part of this should start by ensuring that this report is widely disseminated to policy makers world-wide.

I will highlight only a few of many specific recommendations:

Additional investigations are recommended by Member States, by WHO and other UN agencies into the possible way in which tobacco companies have adversely influenced their policies on tobacco control.

Several measures need to be taken by WHO to protect the integrity of its decision making processes. Existing conflict of interest requirements may need review and fuller implementation. In addition, suggestions are made about screening prospective employees, consultants, advisors and committee members for conflicts of interest.

Given the volume of tobacco companies’ acts of subversion identified in its limited research, the committee believes that the harm caused by the tobacco companies conduct was significant and far-reaching. The report therefore recommends WHO to assist Member States to determine what steps are appropriate to remedy past misconduct and to guard against future tobacco company misconduct.

Finally, the inquiry demonstrates the magnitude of the tobacco companies’ opposition to WHO programs and offers insight into their activities, strategies and attitudes. Moreover it demonstrates that tobacco is unlike other threats to health. Reversing the tobacco epidemic - 4 million deaths a year now, projected to increase to about 10 million deaths a year in the 2020’s - will be about more than preventing addiction and curing disease; it will be about overcoming a determined and powerful industry, many of whose most important counter-strategies are carried out in secret.

If this inquiry contributes to that understanding, the committee of experts will have succeeded in its work.

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