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Keynote address at "Tobacco Investments in the Pharmaceutical Sector" webinar - Global Centre for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC)

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Tobacco is not pharma: New challenges with the new tobacco tactics

The tobacco industry narrative has been full of contradictions, virtually since its inception.

As early as 1954 – as a consequence of studies linking smoking with lung cancer – major tobacco companies collaborated on “A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers”, which cast doubt on scientific findings and maintained that the industry “always has and always will cooperate closely with those whose task it is to safeguard public health”.

Throughout the years, this deception has continued .

But current narratives have reached the absurd: an industry that produces a product that kills at least half of its users is now:

- concerned with the public health agenda through its self-serving concept of “harm reduction”;
- aiming for legitimacy by trying to shoehorn itself into favourable environmental, social and governance ratings; and
- – this is probably the icing on the cake – acquiring pharmaceutical companies that produce medications to treat many of the diseases caused... by smoking.

What could possibly be behind this latest industry tactic?

There are many possibilities: increased access to government policy-makers and an opportunity to improve the industry’s image through an association with pharmaceuticals.

Or perhaps just perfecting their “nicotine” market, making the drug available in any possible form: conventional cigarettes, heated tobacco, nicotine products, and now possibly inhalers and other forms of delivery that they will access through their acquisition of pharmaceutical companies.

The answer might be “all of the above”, but the last one – the “nicotine market” – seems to always have been at the centre of their business.

There is quite a rich history, told by the industry itself.

In 1963, William Dunn Jr, a Principal Scientist with Philip Morris said: “The cigarette should be conceived not as a product but as a package. The product is nicotine ...Think of a cigarette as a dispenser for a dose unit of nicotine...Think of a puff of smoke as the vehicle of nicotine...”

In 1972, a memo from the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company said: “In a sense, the tobacco industry may be thought of as being a specialized, highly ritualized and stylized segment of the pharmaceutical industry. Tobacco products uniquely contain and deliver nicotine, a potent drug with a variety of physiological effects.”

The tobacco industry is trying to convince the world that it has changed.

Yet even while saying it wants to stop selling conventional cigarettes, the industry is continuing to open new factories in developing countries.

But Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and its Guidelines for Implementation remind us in the first guiding principle: “There is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict of interest between the tobacco industry’s interests and public health policy interests.”

And we must note that this conflict is not only with tobacco control policies, but with public health policy interests.

The Article 5.3 Guidelines for Implementation contain a range of solutions with which to confront this latest tobacco industry strategy.

One statement has particular resonance: “The tobacco industry should not be a partner in any initiative linked to setting or implementing public health policies, given that its interests are in direct conflict with the goals of public health.”

The only way to fight the incredible dissonance of the tobacco industry’s latest strategy is to work together to ensure that our core principles – and history – are not forgotten.

Thank you.