Giants accused of smokescreen

Study alleges tobacco industry is keeping pubs and restaurants smoky.
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US public-health researchers are accusing the tobacco industry of manipulating restaurant and bar trade bodies to maintain smoking in public places. Even designated non-smoking areas do not protect workers or patrons from second-hand smoke, they claim.

Unable to petition governments openly, tobacco giants are alleged to have financed and lobbied professional hospitality organizations to act on their behalf. So says Stanton Glantz of the University of California, San Francisco, a medical researcher and long-time campaigner for clean indoor air.

Told that excluding smokers threatens business, associations representing the hotel, restaurant and nightclub industry pressurize governments and local authorities not to pass anti-smoking legislation, says Glantz. "Tobacco companies have shrewdly turned this respectable group into their lobbying agency," he argues.

Glantz and his colleagues have analysed tobacco-industry documents available on the Internet as a result of US court cases. They found evidence that the industry sponsored or funded the activities of 65 US-based and 7 international professional bodies since the early 1990s. Where no such group existed, the tobacco industry established its own association, he claims.

For example, since 1994 the tobacco industry has financed the international 'Courtesy of Choice' programme, which encourages restaurants and pubs to offer designated smoking and non-smoking sections. The programme offers staff training, advice on installing ventilation systems and welcoming stickers.

Although some of these activities have been documented before, this is the first large-scale description. "There's been a lot of suspicion," says Marsha Williams of Action on Smoking and Health (ASH), a worldwide charitable organization that represents non-smokers' rights, "but here you can see it in black and white."

Programmes such as Courtesy of Choice are "entirely appropriate", contends a statement from tobacco company Philip Morris International, arguing that a total ban on smoking in restaurants and bars is "extreme". The statement continues: "We respectfully disagree...that it is inappropriate for us to express these views or to seek the support of business sectors that might share the same concerns."

Hazy benefits

The clean-air campaign is more advanced in the United States, Australia and New Zealand than in Europe. Most US states have laws limiting smoking in work areas and public places. Many communities are passing more stringent local laws banning smoking in bars and restaurants too.

Outlawing smoking in public places hits cigarette consumption - but its impact on business is still debated. The tobacco industry and some hospitality associations contend that smoking bans dent pub and restaurant profits. "Of course it will have an impact," says Martin Couchman of the British Hospitality Association, based in London.

Glantz argues the opposite: that smoking bans have no effect on revenues. In non-smoking premises, smokers either go outside or do not smoke, he says.
Couchman denies being manipulated by the tobacco industry. "It's true some of the information comes from the tobacco industry," he says - but the British Hospitality Association uses its experience, not these reports, to advise members, he adds.

Policy-makers may be oblivious to the influence that the tobacco industry may have on some hospitality-industry representations. Williams suspects that industry lobbying has delayed the adoption of the UK's Approved Code of Practice on passive smoking in workplaces. "The government should be cautious about the messages it's getting," she warns.

**Non-smoking section**

A second study published this week suggests that smoking sections expose workers to second-hand smoke at levels that may endanger their health. Michael Bates and his colleagues at the Institute of Environmental Science and Research in Porirua, New Zealand, measured the amount of cotinine, a breakdown product of nicotine, in the saliva of bar and restaurant workers before and after their shifts.

Workers from premises with designated smoking areas had more cotinine than those from smoke-free environments - and at quantities that have been associated with increased risks of cancer and heart disease. "Policies in hospitality premises that restrict customer smoking to certain areas do not eliminate exposure to second-hand smoke," the team says.

Philip Morris acknowledges that this is true, and says it supports wide-ranging restrictions on smoking in public places and advocates communication of the health risks of second-hand smoke. "Governments can regulate public smoking while continuing to grant businesses some ability to permit smoking," it says.

**References**


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