

Passive-smoking study faces review

Officials at the University of California are in the throes of a debate on whether to ban research grants from tobacco companies. The discussion has now sparked an independent review of a controversial 2003 report that contested the dangers of second-hand smoke.

Researchers within the nine-campus university can accept money for research from the tobacco industry unless their department specifically bans it. To critics, the new uproar is an example of why all scientists should be prohibited from taking such grants.

"This devastatingly shows university policies and procedures are not robust enough to deal with the influence of tobacco money," says Stanton Glantz, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, and a long-time critic of tobacco grants (L. A. Bero *et al. Tob. Control* **14**, 118–126; 2005).

Robert Dynes, president of the university system, has led the fight to continue tobacco funding, saying that stopping it would infringe academic freedom and possibly hinder other business grants. He has also argued that university policies adequately regulate the ethics of such funding.

The new review concerns a study in the *British Medical Journal* (*BMJ*) that said spouses of smokers were no more likely to die of lung cancer and heart disease than were spouses of non-smokers (J. E. Enstrom and G. C. Kabat *Br. Med. J.* **326**, 1057; 2003). The study, led by epidemiologist James Enstrom of the University of California, Los Angeles, looked at 118,000 subjects from a study set up by the American Cancer Society beginning in 1959.

But top scientists at the cancer society say they repeatedly warned Enstrom of possible deficiencies in his analysis — particularly a 25-year gap in which exposure to second-hand smoke could not be verified. The society also says that when it gave Enstrom computerized records of study subjects, it was not aware that he was receiving funding from the tobacco industry. Later tobacco-related lawsuits revealed he had received money from industry funnelled through an organization called the Center for Indoor Air Research. And court records show Enstrom previously did consulting and research for attorneys defending the tobacco companies R. J. Reynolds and Philip Morris.

In August 2006, a US federal judge cited the *BMJ* study as a prime example of how nine tobacco companies engaged in criminal racket-



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A study that played down the dangers of second-hand smoke is now being scrutinized for bias.

eering and fraud to hide the dangers of tobacco smoke. The tobacco companies dispute the judge's decision, which they are appealing.

Enstrom and his co-author Geoffrey Kabat, formerly of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, stoutly defend the research against its critics. "They have engaged in a very sophisticated four-year campaign of disinformation about me," says Enstrom. "I have withstood incredible attacks."

The latest round of debate began last autumn when the chief executive of the American Cancer Society, John Seffrin, wrote a letter to the University of California's board of regents arguing that tobacco funding should be banned. In the 12 October letter, Seffrin argued that tobacco-funded front groups "publicized misleading results" while giving "the false implication" that the society had endorsed the study. He cited Enstrom's *BMJ* article in particular, alleging that Enstrom "ignored" complaints of "fundamental methodological problems".

But the letter never made it to the regents at the time, because of what Dynes now calls an error in handling correspondence; he has initiated a review of such practices. The letter became more widely known when Glantz showed it on an overhead screen during a regents meeting on 18 January.

The next day, Wyatt Hume, provost at the University of California's president's office, wrote

to Seffrin saying that the university "takes allegations of scientific misconduct extremely seriously". If there is "specific information in support of an allegation of scientific misconduct against Enstrom", he wrote, he would relay it to officials at the Los Angeles campus so that they "can pursue the matter further". Shortly after, officials at the cancer society sent a seven-page list of what they cited as issues with the *BMJ* article.

On 16 February, Dynes wrote a four-page letter to regents chairman Richard Blum noting how the allegations about the *BMJ* article didn't follow the form of a typical complaint. "We decided to err on the side of caution and refer the matter to the appropriate campus official for follow-up," Dynes wrote. Officials at the Los Angeles campus "will conduct a thorough review of the documents", he wrote, and "will take further steps to determine whether any research misconduct took place".

In an interview, Enstrom acknowledged receiving the various letters and corresponding with the University of California's authorities. "I am working on this with regents' approval", he said. "I am being allowed to defend myself by the appropriate people."

He "absolutely" denies any misconduct in the study. And Kabat objects to the university's regent policies being based "on allegations motivated by a political agenda and unsupported by any facts".

The university's regents are expected to revisit the debate on tobacco funding in May. ■

Rex Dalton

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