Dispatch: Conflict of Interest: The Smoking Gun

By ACSH Staff — April 30, 2010

According to the Wall Street Journal [1], “The U.S. Food and Drug Administration rejected a request by cigarette giant Philip Morris USA to remove four members of a key tobacco-products advisory panel that the company said had extensive conflicts of interest." The panel is intended to assess the role of smokeless tobacco products as a means of harm reduction for addicted smokers.

“In this case, I have to agree with Philip Morris, i.e. Altria,” says ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan. “These panelists are biased. In these days of full disclosure and removing people from panels for financial conflicts, it appears that now the FDA is going to allow this purportedly impartial panel to include people who have interests in selling ineffective nicotine patches and gum while decrying the use of effective harm reduction methods, such as smokeless tobacco.”

ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross agrees: “Those named in the Philip Morris action are well-known zealots who are the farthest thing from what they should be: neutral advisors.”

“To me, this is evidence that the broader conflict of interest debate is being used as a political tool that has nothing to do with actual conflicts of interest,” says ACSH’s Jeff Stier. “When ideologues who decry ‘conflicts of interest’ can use them to promote their policy agenda, they use the term rather broadly, and say that they want to avoid even the appearance of conflict of interest. Yet when the conflict of interest issue undermines their policy agenda, as it does here, they not only ignore the appearance of conflict, but actual conflicts of interest.”

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