



Center tied to tobacco industry

Indoor Air Research funding is questioned

By SCOTT SHANE
SUN STAFF

When Johns Hopkins researcher Dr. Genevieve Mataroski published a study in 1986 suggesting that lung cancer cases attributed to secondhand smoke might actually result from diet or other factors, her paper acknowledged support from the Center for Indoor Air Research.

What she did not say was that the center, operated from modest offices near Baltimore-Washington International Airport, gets its money from the nation's four largest cigarette makers. More than 90 percent of the approximately \$5 million the center gives out each year comes directly from the tobacco industry.

Tobacco industry documents and interviews suggest that the center is far from being an "independent, non-profit organization," as it is described in one brochure.

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FRONT PAGE

THE NATION

Center's research study funding is questioned

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center was created by industry lawyers and the Tobacco Institute in 1988 to blunt the attack of health advocates as evidence mounted that secondhand smoke causes lung cancer, heart disease and respiratory illness. All its grants must be approved by a board of directors made up of two top research executives from each of the four tobacco companies.

"Their true purpose was to generate disinformation," says Richard Daynard, a Boston law professor and chairman of the Tobacco Products Liability Project.

Dr. Michele Bloch, a Maryland physician and co-author of the American Public Health Association's policy urging health institutions not to accept money from cigarette makers, said the center's name is misleading. "The tobacco industry is corrupting science," she said. "Very few people know this is tobacco money."

Not so, say the center's staff and supporters, including Matanoski, a prominent epidemiologist at Hopkins' School of Public Health who has herself been awarded \$2.3 million by the center since 1993 and serves on its scientific advisory board. In effect, they

say that whatever purpose cigarette makers may have had in creating the center, they have been vigilant in guarding against industry bias.

"If they're willing to fund me, I take the money," said Matanoski, a member and former chairwoman of the Environmental Protection Agency's science advisory board. "If the scientist is honest, [tobacco industry funding] can be a big boost for research. CIAR is working in an area where there's very little money for research."

Max Eisenberg, 55, a chemist and former Maryland assistant secretary of environment, has served as executive director of the center since its creation. "I've tried my hardest to maintain the center as a premier organization that gets the best studies done by the best people," he says.

Debate has raged among public health specialists for years over whether scientists should accept tobacco industry money for research. Like the American Public Health Association, the American Medical Association advises health researchers not to take tobacco money and scientific journals not to publish tobacco-supported papers.

Few universities appear to have adopted such policies, partly out of concern for academic freedom. The Johns Hopkins University divested itself of tobacco stocks in 1991, declaring, "The university cannot teach that smoking is the most preventable cause of death, and at the same time profit from investing in tobacco-related stocks." But it has never banned tobacco industry research grants, and Hopkins' school of public health has been awarded \$5.4 mil-



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Director Max Eisenberg, executive director of the Center for Indoor Air Research, is a chemist and former assistant secretary of the Maryland Department of the Environment.

lion from the indoor air center.

"The fact that the money comes from tobacco companies does make me uncomfortable," said Dr. Alfred Sommer, the school's dean. "Would I rather that the money came from NIH [the federal National Institutes of Health]? Yes. But NIH isn't supporting this kind of research."

'Sophisticated industry'

Sommer said that "as long as there's no meddling with results, I don't see a problem." But he added: "We've learned this is a very sophisticated industry. ... Have they outfoxed us here? Having learned what we've now learned, we'll go back and review these issues."

Most controversy to date has focused on the Council for Tobacco Research, created in 1954 with an industry pledge to sponsor research on the emerging links between smoking and disease. Instead, industry documents show, the council was used to maintain the appearance of corporate responsibility while tobacco companies hid what they knew about smoking hazards.

The battle over the Council for Tobacco Research culminated this month as New York's attorney general went to court to try to strip the tax-exempt status of the council and the Tobacco Institute, the industry's lobbying and public

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relations arm, both incorporated in New York. The petition charged that the two groups have "acted in a persistently fraudulent and illegal manner."

Last week, industry lawyers negotiating an end to Minnesota's tobacco lawsuit agreed to disband the Council for Tobacco Research as a condition of settlement.

The Center for Indoor Air Research, which might be described as the council's younger brother, has largely avoided public attention. Top scientists have continued to serve on its scientific advisory board. Its environmentally friendly name gives no hint of its tobacco sponsorship, permitting researchers not to acknowledge explicitly their industry ties.

Asked whether listing the research center as the funding source for her paper did not obscure the fact that it was tobacco industry money, Matanoski replied that the center is "a conglomerate of different funders."

Told that more than 90 percent of the budget comes from Phillip Morris, R. J. Reynolds Tobacco, Brown & Williamson and Lorillard, she said, "I pay no attention to that. I didn't know what money came from where."

Vague about funding

Dr. Irving Kessler, a University of Maryland epidemiologist who has served on the center's scientific advisory board since it opened, was even more vague about the origins of the research money he helps distribute each year.

"I don't know anything about the funding. But it's not directly related to the tobacco industry," he said, adding, "We were assured there would be no corporate pressure of any kind."

While much of the center's secondhand smoke research, like Matanoski's paper, has produced results favorable to the industry, other papers it has supported could only hurt the industry. Papers by Rebecca Bascom at the University of Maryland reported headaches, eye irritation and other symptoms caused by indoor smoke. Other papers supported by the center have reported that smoke produced cellular changes in guinea pigs, rats and roosters that could be precursors to cancer or heart disease.

Some of the center's defenders point to the fact that about 80 percent of the research it supports does not involve secondhand smoke at all, but a wide variety of indoor pollutants ranging from photocopier emissions to paint fumes.

But industry documents show that one strategy tobacco lawyers devised in the [See Smoking, 9A]

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Supporters deny bias in funding from air research center

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1980s to battle the secondhand smoke issue was to encourage aggressive research on other indoor air pollutants.

"If they can blame something else, tobacco smoke doesn't look so bad," said Dr. Randolph D. Smoak, a South Carolina cancer surgeon and vice chairman of the American Medical Association board of trustees.

Newspapers around the country and some abroad have reported a center-financed study by Cornell University researcher Alan Hedge finding that "sick building syndrome" is not caused by cigarette smoke but by mineral fibers. None of the stories noted the study's tobacco funding.

In 1996, two University of California researchers reviewed the center's funding and publication record and found that some projects never were submitted to the scientific advisory board for review — and those projects were most likely to support industry positions on secondhand smoke. They also criticized researchers for lack of candor.

"We concluded that if CIAR wants to go on funding people, fine, but they should say that the money comes from the tobacco industry," said Lisa A. Bero, one of the authors.

Last year, in a class-action suit of flight attendants against the cigarette makers, industry lawyers tried to present testimony on a study of smoke exposure levels — one that had bypassed the scientific board's review.

After hearing about the center's funding of the research, the Florida judge remarked, "It reminds you of a fox in the hen house in a situation like this."

Such accusations are inevitable fallout from the highly politicized tobacco debate, Eisenberg said. But he insisted he has been vigilant to prevent politics from filtering into the center's deliberations.

When the tobacco executives on the board of directors meet with him, Eisenberg says, "They know better than to bring up the politics of this issue. If somebody gets out of line, I say, 'This is not the place for those kind of discussions.'"

Documents released this year in the Minnesota tobacco case show that the center's founders were not always so reticent.

The documents show that an industry-funded institute on indoor air quality was first proposed at a February 1987 meeting in Naples, Fla., of top tobacco company lawyers, the Committee of Counsel. For decades, the committee directed industry-funded research to fend off lawsuits.

From the beginning, tobacco

lawyers and executives debated whether the institute should pay for high-quality research to boost the industry's lagging prestige or simply churn out studies supporting industry stances in lawsuits and regulatory hearings.

Fear that the Center for Indoor Air Research would be a tool of the industry scared off Irwin H. Billick, a chemist initially recruited for the job of executive director.

During negotiations, "things got a little weird" when Tobacco Institute lawyer John Rupp made it clear to him that industry officials would have the last word on what research was funded.

"I even met the head of the Tobacco Institute, and he said, 'You better hurry up and get going, because we need research to get us out of the mess we're in,'" Billick said.

He decided that balancing legal and scientific needs would prove too stressful.

Rupp, with the powerhouse tobacco firm of Covington & Burling, is still general counsel of the Center for Indoor Air Research.

The Tobacco Institute's spokesman on the secondhand smoke issue at OSHA hearings in 1994, is identified in various memos as key industry strategist.

Rupp denied that he exercises any control over the center's research, a claim Eisenberg confirmed.

Industry documents show the cigarette companies long debated the center's proper role. In 1992, R. J. Reynolds proposed dropping the center's sophisticated scientific research in favor of studies targeted exclusively at blocking federal limits on workplace smoking.

Philip Morris objected, and one executive said he feared turning the center into a no-holds-barred political operation would prompt Eisenberg to quit and Matanoski to stop helping with the design of a

major planned study.

In the event, R. J. Reynolds backed off its threat.

No one resigned, and Matanoski was ultimately given \$1.6 million herself for the "confounders study," a study of possible factors that might be producing effects attributed to secondhand smoke.

Eisenberg said he had never seen the memo. But he added: "Well, I guess I'm flattered that they have that opinion of me — that I would have resigned."

"In an ideal world, it would make it a lot simpler if you didn't have politics involved with the science."

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