

The University of Geneva Decides to Distance Itself from the Tobacco Industry Comments by CIPRET-Genève and OxyGenève

Geneva, 16 December 2001

In a press release entitled "The University of Geneva takes its distance from the tobacco industry", the University of Geneva announced on 12 December that it is formally requesting its members not to accept funding from the tobacco industry anymore. In addition, the University of Geneva indicated that it is taking measures to guarantee a greater degree of transparency and control in the financing of academic research by the private sector. It is instructing its members to systematically mention the source of funding in their publications and when presenting their results. Finally, the University has asked its former member, Prof. Ragnar Rylander, to publicly distance himself from the tendentious use that the tobacco industry has made of his research.

The above measures have been adopted by the University following the release of a report by an internal commission, which had been asked to investigate the links between the tobacco industry and some researchers at the University. Among the researchers under scrutiny, the most notable was Prof. Ragnar Rylander. The investigation had been decided following a press conference in March 2001 during which our two associations, CIPRET and OxyGenève, made revelations about the infiltration of the University of Geneva by the tobacco industry and presented documents that showed the particular role played by Prof. Rylander.

Although the investigation committee could find no evidence of scientific fraud, its other findings are nevertheless quite damning for Prof. Rylander. The commission has determined that the epidemiological work of Prof. Rylander lacked scientific rigor and that his persistent choice of confounding factors for ETS as research themes was not "innocent", as he could not ignore that his work minimized the effect of ETS on the development of tumors and that the tobacco industry would use his results to cast doubt about the harm caused by smoking on public health. Prof. Rylander is said in the report to have under-evaluated the impact of his research on society. The report also criticizes him for the opacity of his financing, observing that the money he received from Philip Morris was paid into private bank accounts in breach of university legislation.

For the press release issued by the University of Geneva on 12 December (in French), see: <http://www.unige.ch/presse/communique/01-02/tabac.html>

For the report (also in French), see: <http://www.unige.ch/presse/communique/01-02/tabac.pdf>

For our two associations, this outcome is a great victory and represents more than we were expecting. We are not disappointed that the investigation commission did not find evidence of scientific fraud, since we did not expect they would. Contrary to what Prof. Rylander pretends, we have not made such an allegation. We said instead that Prof. Rylander was involved in an unprecedented scientific fraud that the tobacco industry has been staging for the last 30 years or more. This is clearly a topic that goes far beyond the scope of the investigation. Most of the facts we denounced at our press conference fall under administrative prescription (5 years) and the investigation committee had therefore little incentive to look into them. In particular, they did not contact us and ask for the extensive

documentation we have. Given that the investigation was confined within very narrow limits, its findings and outcome are all the more truly remarkable.

Our two associations, CIPRET and OxyGenève, issued on 12 December a press release in which we essentially expressed our satisfaction. Here is an English translation of this press release.

Press release of 12 December 2001 by CIPRET and OxyGenève

Decision of the University of Geneva to distance itself from the tobacco industry

Our two associations have today taken due note of the conclusions and measures presented by the University of Geneva in its report, and of the press release that accompanied it.

We applaud the decision by the University of Geneva to distance itself from the tobacco industry and to instruct all its members not to accept anymore funding from the tobacco industry. This is a clear and courageous decision, which is of historical significance. We hope the University of Geneva will stimulate other universities in Switzerland and Europe to take a similar stand.

We greet the determination of the University to introduce a greater level of transparency in the financing of research and to raise the moral standard of research by taking into account fundamental human rights such as those associated with public health.

We think that the above measures will make it possible to avoid the recurrence of situations such as the one we denounced at our press conference of last 29 March. In this respect, we are satisfied that the University of Geneva has taken measures intended to prevent its infiltration by the tobacco industry and its use by this industry to spread scientific disinformation.

We observe that the University of Geneva indicates that the research work of its former collaborator, Prof. Ragnar Rylander, lacked scientific rigor and notices that the choices of his research themes were not "innocent". We are satisfied with the University's decision to request Prof. Rylander and his former assistant to publicly distance themselves from the tendentious use that the tobacco industry has made of the results of their research. By talking about "tendentious use", the University makes a reference - even if it is a timid one - to the scientific fraud that we have denounced in our press conference, without going into further detail.

Our two associations have taken due note that the investigation commission focused exclusively on the work done in Geneva by Prof. Rylander and his group. This probably explains why Messrs Diethelm and Rielle [respectively president of OxyGenève and director of CIPRET] have not been contacted and were not asked to provide the commission with the documents they had in their hands. While the commission indicates that no evidence of scientific fraud could be found in the strictly Geneva context, it emphasizes that Prof. Rylander's epidemiological methods lacked rigor and points out his responsibility towards society in publishing his results. This comforts us in our assertions and in the facts that we denounced at our press conference of last 29 March, namely Prof. Rylander's participation in a vast scientific fraud of a global scale staged by the tobacco industry. The complaint for defamation filed by Prof. Rylander against us will give us the opportunity to present to the tribunal all the evidence we have, including the evidence relating to Prof. Rylander's activities outside Geneva, and to prove the assertions that we stated and continue to state.

Signed: For OxyGenève: P. Diethelm, President - For CIPRET: Dr Jean-Charles Rielle, Médecin responsable CIPRET-Genève

To consult the original French version of the press release, see:
<http://www.prevention.ch/rycp121201.htm>

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