

*For and against***Should Nottingham University give back its tobacco money?**

Richard Smith, editor of the *BMJ*, is professor of medical journalism at Nottingham University, which has taken £3.8m from British American Tobacco to fund an international centre for the study of corporate responsibility. He argues that the university should return the money. The university's vice chancellor, Sir Colin Campbell, argues the opposite. Readers are asked to vote on bmj.com whether the university should return the money and whether Smith should resign if it doesn't.

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FOR By taking money from the tobacco industry, the University of Nottingham debases itself. It offers the industry—at a cheap price—a respectability it doesn't deserve. Using the money to support an international centre for the study of corporate responsibility is especially unfortunate because the industry has repeatedly behaved irresponsibly. Whatever the internal justification for taking the money, the name of Nottingham University is besmirched.

The question of where "to draw the line" in relation to the tobacco industry arises constantly. Some people think that any contact with the industry is wrong, but the *BMJ* has not adopted this policy. Thus we publish research funded by the industry, arguing that we would distort the scientific record by refusing to publish. The *BMJ* has also carried an advertisement from a tobacco company looking for an occupational physician. Our logic was that employees of a tobacco company deserve the best physician they can get; and in Britain you find the best possible doctor by advertising in the *BMJ*. We have been criticised for both these actions.

So my reaction to Nottingham University taking this money is not a kneejerk response. The university has, I judge, crossed a dangerous line.

Readers of the *BMJ* do not need reminding that tobacco kills, but they may be surprised by the scale of the harm. Tobacco killed about 100 million people prematurely in the 20th century, but it is set to kill one billion in the 21st century—mainly because smoking is now spreading rapidly among people in the developing world.

The numbers are astronomical and hard for people to grasp. I believe that if the leaders of Nottingham University could begin to feel emotionally the human misery caused by tobacco then perhaps BAT's money would be sent straight back. Doctors feel so strongly on the issue because of their daily contact with the suffering.

Why, the university should ask, is BAT giving this money? Does it care about "corporate responsibility"? Clearly not, as its behaviour shows. Does it have more money than it knows what to do with? No, it must be responsible to its shareholders. The company wants something—and thinks that giving money to Nottingham University is a good bargain for getting it. That something is, I suggest, respectability—or the hope of a place in heaven after a lifetime of evil.

An editorial in *Tobacco Control* asks whether the university would take money from an oil baron who has traded petroleum products for weapons, fuelling a lengthy, futile regional conflict, or from a pornographer who has made millions from films employing, on miserable wages, illiterate men and women from slums

and villages of Asian nations.¹ Where does a university, a moral institution that must lead thinking in its community, draw the line? Probably no university would take money from the oil baron or the pornographer, though these are both legal activities. Universities must consider not only what's legal but also what's ethical.

Imagine the plight of the tobacco companies, when they discovered in the 1960s that their product was killing millions. How should they have responded? They might have put their heads in the sand, said that their trade was legal, observed that people have a choice, stated their duty to their shareholders, and carried on. Alternatively, they might—as did BP Amoco when faced with the problems of environmental destruction—have accepted the reality of the evidence, recognised their social responsibility, and reoriented the whole business.

What the industry actually did was worse than putting its head in the sand. It refused to accept the evidence, systematically and often covertly tried to undermine the science that was causing its problems, and resorted to promoting its products among children and people in the developing world, recognising the business importance of creating "new addicts." In short, it behaved unethically—and, in the eyes of many courts, illegally.

How in such circumstances can Nottingham University accept tobacco money for an international centre for corporate social responsibility? The notion causes people to giggle. The centre's name reads like an improbable invention of Dickens, Swift, or David Lodge, one modern observer of the corruption of universities. Nottingham University looks either grasping, naive, or foolish; all are bad for a university that wants to be a world leader in thinking and study.

The vice chancellor seems to have convinced himself that taking the money is acceptable because the industry is legal and because Universities UK (the committee of vice chancellors and principals) and the Cancer Research Campaign say it's all right (a curious position for an organisation that is supposedly doing all it can to reduce deaths from cancer). But many other people and organisations—particularly those concerned about health—will think it entirely wrong to take the money. It's thus the medical school that will suffer, while it's the business school that gets the money. The medical school has in a remarkably short time achieved a high reputation among British medical schools. The university now puts that at risk.—Richard Smith

1 Chapman S, Shatenstein S. The ethics of the cash register: taking tobacco research dollars *Tobacco Control* 2001;10:1-2. <http://tc.bmjournals.com/content/full/10/1/1> [accessed 26 April 2001]

AGAINST The University of Nottingham is a non-profit making organisation. Its diverse sources of funding help to keep it at the leading edge of research and teaching in the United Kingdom and, increasingly, overseas. Corporate funding has long been a feature of the university's balance sheet. After consultation both within and outside the university, it was agreed that the university could and should make good use of monies from British American Tobacco.

More than 100 million people around the world depend on the tobacco industry for employment. Many countries have decided to tax tobacco products to help fund housing, health, and social services. In Britain, the government collects around £8bn in tobacco tax revenues annually; it is doubtful that the current quality of social services could be maintained without these revenues.

In every country of the world tobacco companies are allowed to produce and market tobacco products. This may be wise or unwise, but it is a fact. In the United Kingdom a white paper on tobacco stated: "Government action in areas of personal choice like smoking is a difficult and sensitive issue. Tobacco is a uniquely dangerous product. If introduced today, it would not stand the remotest chance of being legal. But smoking is not against the law."¹ The white paper goes on to say that the government fully recognises the right of the quarter of the British population that smokes to do so and that it doesn't propose to infringe on that right.

The university has been in discussion with British American Tobacco for some time—it first approached the company in the mid-1990s for assistance in funding a poorly resourced hospital in Uganda. Unfortunately that and successive approaches failed, but eventually, in January 2000, negotiations began between the university and British American Tobacco on funding developments in the university's business school.

The university was fortunate that, some years previously, the national debate over acceptance of funds from tobacco companies had led the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (now Universities UK) to agree a joint protocol with the Cancer Research Campaign. The protocol was designed to ensure that research supported by the Cancer Research Campaign was not also funded by monies from tobacco companies. Specifically the protocol stated that the campaign would not support any institution where researchers supported by the campaign's funds would be likely to share facilities, equipment or other resources with colleagues supported by tobacco industry funding, but that "funding in a quite different faculty or school of the University is not covered by this protocol."

The university was able to meet the conditions of the protocol. The valuable collaborative medical research funded by the Cancer Research Campaign is based in the faculties of medicine and science;

the British American Tobacco funding is to go to the business school in the faculty of law and social sciences.

In dialogue with the Cancer Research Campaign during 2000, the university indicated its intention to accept a donation from British American Tobacco. It further confirmed that, in accordance with the protocol, the new International Centre for the Study of Corporate Responsibility would be organisationally, fiscally, and physically separate from the Schools of Medicine, Nursing, and Pharmaceutical Sciences. In December 2000 the university announced a £3.8m donation from British American Tobacco.

The public scrutiny of multinational companies is increasing; stakeholders are holding companies more and more accountable. Indeed the government has appointed its own minister for social responsibility. The investment in the new centre will build on the university's existing research and teaching strengths. The issue of corporate social responsibility is urgent and relevant. Specifically, the International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility will develop world-class management education for future business leaders. We expect British American Tobacco to be just one of several companies making donations to the centre. Its funding will support a professorial appointment as director, an annual appointment of a visiting professor or scholar from the developing world, and scholarships for students of outstanding academic merit from developing countries.

The university has publicly acknowledged that people will have different views on the advisability of accepting funding from tobacco companies. These views are respected. However, in furthering the university's research—and especially research that is relevant to the world's problems today—we welcome diverse sources of funding. In years to come, few people will question the fact that the University of Nottingham accepted funds from the tobacco industry. What they will see instead will be the high quality, globally relevant input to corporate social responsibility led by the university's business school.—Colin Campbell

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Vote on whether the
editor should resign



Cast your vote on the BMJ's website

¹ Department of Health. *Smoking kills: a white paper on tobacco*. London: Stationery Office, 1998:11. (Cm4177.)

Endpiece

The primary source

After a short search we found an archetype for Eric Jacobs [Kingsley Amis's biographer]. We found him in the primary source, Shakespeare, where everybody is to be found, sooner or later.

Martin Amis, *Experience*.
London: Jonathan Cape, 2000