

On Research...

Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University



[Home](#) [About us](#) [Research Communications Staff](#)

The smoking gun . . .

Posted on February 25th, 2010 by earleholland

Finding organizations willing to take a moral stance in support of the public welfare seems all too rare these days. Either the reticence of those in charge fearing a backlash, or a feeling that said organization is unaffected by a particular issue, often results in not getting involved.

So when the open-access science journal *PLOS Medicine* announced its new policy earlier



this week to reject the publication of any reports on research funded by the tobacco industry, many saw this as a righteous stance worthy of applause.

But while the sentiment the policy backs is laudable, the actual action discounts aspects of the way modern research is done. And their blanket refusal seems sadly simplistic, and more for show than effect.

From the outset, understand that I abhor smoking and all things related. The mere whiff of cigarette smoke can send me spiraling into a massive headache that debilitates for hours. Growing up in a family of smokers, I watched my father die all too young, the victim of esophageal cancer no doubt linked to a lifetime of pipe smoking.

It is a dirty, filthy addiction lacking any value so I give it no quarter.

In its editorial announcing the new policy, *PLOS Medicine* emphasized the deplorable and now-well-known history of the tobacco industry's efforts to mislead the public and influence both public policy and research as justifications for its draconian stance. And it cites other scientific journals that have similar policies as further backing.



But there are flaws in this logic. Things are never so simple that a single rule change can fix a problem, and the journal's stance may actually be more of a business decision than a moral one. Establishing itself as untainted by tobacco funding will surely enhance its brand.

More importantly, though, are the underlying assumptions on which the policy ban is based.

First among these is the idea that individual researchers lack an adequate moral compass to insure that their acceptance of tobacco-related funding would not affect the outcome of their research, that they fundamentally can be "bought" by their sponsor!

NAVIGATION

- * [Home](#)
- * [About us](#)
- * [Research Communications Staff](#)

RECENT POSTS

- * [A graphic misrepresentation . . .](#)
- * [Of ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties . . .](#)
- * [A cascade of lemmings . . .](#)
- * [Not what Ben meant . . .](#)
- * [Of science, baseball, and cricket . . .](#)

SOCIAL MEDIA

- * [OSU Research News on the Web](#)
- * [Research News on Facebook](#)
- * [Research News on YouTube](#)
- * [StumbleUpon](#)

WHAT WE READ

- * [Dot Earth — Andrew Revkin/New York Times](#)
- * [Framing Science](#)
- * [Health News Review](#)
- * [Knight Science Journalism Tracker](#)
- * [Real Climate](#)
- * [Science News](#)
- * [Speaking of Research](#)
- * [The Great Beyond](#)
- * [The Panda's Thumb](#)
- * [The Plainspoken Scientist](#)
- * [TierneyLab](#)
- * [WiredScience](#)



CATEGORIES

- * [Climate change](#)
- * [Environment](#)
- * [Physics](#)
- * [Researchers](#)
- * [Science Communication](#)
- * [Science policy](#)
- * [Space](#)
- * [Uncategorized](#)

ARCHIVES

- * [February 2012](#)
- * [January 2012](#)
- * [October 2011](#)
- * [September 2011](#)
- * [August 2011](#)
- * [July 2011](#)
- * [May 2011](#)
- * [April 2011](#)
- * [March 2011](#)
- * [December 2010](#)
- * [October 2010](#)
- * [September 2010](#)
- * [August 2010](#)
- * [July 2010](#)
- * [June 2010](#)
- * [May 2010](#)
- * [April 2010](#)
- * [March 2010](#)
- * [February 2010](#)
- * [January 2010](#)
- * [December 2009](#)
- * [November 2009](#)
- * [October 2009](#)
- * [September 2009](#)
- * [August 2009](#)
- * [July 2009](#)
- * [June 2009](#)
- * [May 2009](#)

For a journal whose universe is comprised of academic researchers to have such little faith in their responsible conduct of research is depressing at best.

Responsible researchers — and the institutions they work for — have safeguards in the research funding process that prevent sponsors for influencing the outcome of the work. And in cases when those are inadequate — or when individuals intentionally try to circumvent them — the episodes inevitably become public and the miscreants are purged from the research world.

Supporters of the policy may argue with the last point, citing cases of scientific misconduct, but doing so fails to consider what a minuscule proportion of the entire research universe this handful of misbehavers represents. Punishing all for the misdeeds of a few is as disagreeable now to most folks as it was back in grammar school, not to mention insulting.

The policy also disregards the pattern of sponsorship that many, if not most, researchers employ. Most scientists I have known gain support from multiple sources and various grants, each isolated to a certain set of research questions but comprising a related piece of a larger whole. A scholar may have funding from many sources, but he hardly segregates his search for knowledge. The intellectual overlap in modern research permeates all.

To limit a scholar's right to publish based on what source of support he might enjoy places artificial boundaries on scientific inquiry and misrepresents the current practice of research. And it may drive some scientists away from investigations with great potential for public good.

Journals exist to disseminate the progress and advances derived from research, to inform, first and foremost the academy of scholars, and secondarily the public who will derive the most benefit from the work. When they do their jobs well, they follow rigorous standards insuring that published reports have scientific merit, and that reasonable safeguards are in place to guarantee the integrity of the work.

By setting up policies that arbitrarily prohibit a subset of research, *PLOS Medicine* is abrogating its responsibilities to disseminate knowledge and, in effect, acknowledging its inability to make tough judgment calls on submitted papers.

And that does no one any good. __Earle Holland



Powered by [Bookmarkify™](#)

Tags: [Researchers](#), [Science Communication](#), [Science policy](#) // 3 Comments »

3 Responses to “The smoking gun . . .”

[Raditya](#) // May 14, 2010 at 2:36 pm
Tobacco Industry is one of the largest income business in the world, I

- * [April 2009](#)
- * [March 2009](#)
- * [February 2009](#)
- * [January 2009](#)
- * [December 2008](#)
- * [November 2008](#)
- * [October 2008](#)
- * [September 2008](#)
- * [August 2008](#)
- * [July 2008](#)
- * [June 2008](#)
- * [May 2008](#)

META

- * [Log in](#)
- * [Entries RSS](#)
- * [Comments RSS](#)
- * [WordPress.org](#)

RESEARCH NEWS WEBSITE



think it will be very hard to fight the Tobacco Industry heading to, even if it is bad for our future.... Just my 50 cents....

[Scotty Mack](#) // Jun 21, 2010 at 11:28 am

I tend to agree with the author here. This seems to be more of a PR ploy than a sound policy decision.

If anything, as a journalist I would relish the thought of being able to tear apart a tobacco-funded research project that was tainted by a deliberate attempt to mislead the public.

I would only have that opportunity by publishing the report!

[Motorcycle guy](#) // Jul 1, 2010 at 4:03 pm

If it's true that our species is alone in the universe, then I'd have to say the universe aimed rather low and settled for very little

Discussion Area - Leave a Comment

Name (required)

Mail (will not be published) (required)

Website

« [Stubbornness and obstinance . . . More meds, please . . .](#) »

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY ■ WWW.OSU.EDU

© 2006, The Ohio State University | Enarson Hall 154 W 12th Avenue | Columbus, Ohio 43210 | 614-292-OHIO

This page is maintained by: [University Relations](#). [About this site](#).

[Contact](#)

If you have trouble accessing this page and need to request an alternate format, contact webmaster@osu.edu.