Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 8, S.1

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Louis

Welcome to Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco, a weekly podcast from the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath. We are an international and award-winning group that investigates the tactics used by Big Tobacco to maximise its profits at the expense of public health. The evidence we produce helps society to hold this deadly industry to account.

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Multiple speakers

The health issues are massive. Globally, each year, tobacco kills 9 million people. That's the equivalent of wiping out the population of London each year. Corporations are out for profit. Anything that is going to harm those profits is going to be unpalatable to them. This is a massive issue globally because if you look at global deaths just four corporate products, cause between a third and two thirds of all global deaths.

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Louis

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Louis

In this final episode of the season, we're going to explore how the tobacco industry influences science for profit. We'll be discussing how it skews the interpretation of scientific evidence in its favour, how it influences research publication, and also the insider documents that tell us how tobacco companies secretly pay for science. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

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I'm joined today by Dr. Sophie Braznell, a research associate in the Department for Health at the University of Bath. Welcome, Sophie.

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Sophie

Thanks, Louis. Thank you for having me.

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Louis

So, Sophie, let's start. Start at the top, I suppose. So who are the major tobacco companies, and why do they want to influence science?

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Sophie

Oh, great starting question. When we're talking about big tobacco or major tobacco companies, you might hear them called, we're really talking about the transnationals, which essentially means the tobacco companies that are operating across countries. This includes Philip Morris International, the world's biggest tobacco company, closely followed by British American Tobacco and then we also have Japan Tobacco International, Imperial Brands,

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snd then sometimes included in that group is Altria, which is a sort of U.S. based but does have some international reach company, and you might also see people talk about China National Tobacco Corporation, but that depends, they only export about 1% of their cigarettes. So typically we mean the big four: PMI, BAT, JTI and Imperial Brands.

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Louis

Right. So there's a whole host of them. So what's in it for them in trying to try to influence science.

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Sophie

Well the short of it really is money. But I'll elaborate a bit more - by influencing science they can essentially hide the harms of their products and practices, essentially trying to make themselves look good. And in doing that, they're creating this favourable research environment, and policy environment in which it can sell its products, which, you know, inevitably means they can maximise their profits.

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In fact, something I find really interesting from a colleague of mine, Rob Branston, in our group, was he did some research into those profits. And just to put this in perspective for listeners, the tobacco, major tobacco companies, are more profitable than the likes of Fedex, Mondelez, Nestle, Coca Cola, PepsiCo, Starbucks, Heineken, Carlsberg combined. That's just how much money these guys are making today.

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Louis

So there's a lot of money at stake, clearly. I suppose one of the challenges of this, of understanding this process is, is getting evidence for how these companies influence science. I know that some of the evidence for tobacco companies influencing research comes from insider of documents. And I know that you've been involved in exposing some of these activities here at Bath.

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Could you tell us a bit about it?

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Sophie

Yeah. Of course. Leaked documents are so invaluable. They give us an insight into the actual intentions and activities of these companies and, by leaked documents, what we really mean is any sort of company documentation that was internal and then has somehow made its way to the public. Typically that tends to be through legal action and litigation, where companies are forced to hand over these documents, or actually whistleblowers, who come forward from these companies, you know, ex-employees who, think that things haven't been done right or that there might be some wrongdoing and want to bring some evidence to put that forward to the public.

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And actually, we have quite a wealth of experience of working with leaked documents and whistleblowers in the Tobacco Control Research Group. So there's a plethora of knowledge and experience that we have. But, you alluded to what have we been up to recently? In fact, we had a new set of leaked documents from Philip Morris Japan.

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So that's that world leading, biggest tobacco company I talked about a second ago.

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Louis

And this is their Japanese branch, then, is it? Yes.

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Sophie

That's correct. Yeah. So when I say Philip Morris Japan, it's essentially just the Japanese arm of Philip Morris international. And these documents were obtained through a very brave whistleblower who came forward, who was a senior employee at Philip Morris Japan. And essentially we've got this document set of 24 documents. And, really, it was a whirlwind investigation that has garnered international coverage.

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And we're incredibly grateful to the whistleblower. And we strongly encourage at TCRG for this sort of work to continue, because, as I mentioned, it's just so invaluable.

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Louis

So very briefly, what do these documents tell you about how this company was trying to influence science?

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Sophie

Yeah. So they only met a number 24, as I said. So you might think there's not much, but actually they're really detailed and along with the whistleblowers testimony, they give a such an in-depth and rich picture. Unfortunately not a good picture from a public health standpoint. So, we conducted an examination of these documents, really immersing ourselves in them and found within them a number of activities that Philip Morris were doing that seemed to mirror strategies of the past that we know are used to influence, manipulate, misuse, and misrepresent science, all for the ultimate aim of increasing that profit.

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And what I really mean by that, give you some examples. They were doing things, like secretly funding a life sciences consultancy. So essentially an external company, to do all sorts of science adjacent work, you know, everything and anything. But fundamentally and most importantly, they were trying to go out, reach to, what they called, key opinion leaders in all sorts of fields: academia, policy, dentistry, insurance, all businesses and aspects that might have something to do with the tobacco space and try and promote Philip Morris's products, its science and its rhetoric, again, all building this sort of favourable research environment.

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Louis

So it's a sort of, could you say it's a sort of lobbying for science, for the company?

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Sophie

Yeah, it certainly feels that way. They really are going out on behalf of Philip Morris and promoting Philip Morris, saying, hey look at the amazing work these guys are doing to people who have real world, life changing influence.

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Louis

That's really interesting. It sounds like there's a lot to dig into there. Maybe we'll touch on that again a bit later. Before we do that, I think let's, let's get into the issue of why is this a problem? I think for some people they'll hear like, well, okay, these tobacco companies are conducting science. Surely science is a process, it’s a robust process,

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it's about generating evidence and facts and why shouldn't tobacco companies be involved in this? You know, but why is this a problem for them, for them to be influencing it in this manner?

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Sophie

Yeah, I hear this all the time. Often people will come to me and say, well, surely, you know, our judgment on evidence and science should be based on its scientific merit, not who's funding it. And science is often viewed, particularly in academia, as this sort of objective thing, but actually, time and again, the industry has shown us that it can and will manipulate all aspects of science.

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So even if the science itself is completely robust. Okay, let's I mean that's not always the case with tobacco industry science, which I'm sure we can touch on later, but even if it was the most robust, objective piece of science, the industry can still misuse it to cultivate undue influence and credibility. I mean, take, for example, in the States where PMI’s science on one of its products was reviewed by a regulatory agency there, and the regulatory agency found in favour of Philip Morris and allowed that products to be marketed in the region, well, not just celebrating,

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Philip Morris decided to take that decision and promote it worldwide in other countries, saying, hey, look what the States did. You should all do the exact same thing because they obviously think our science is robust. So again, it's all about cultivating the credibility for them.

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Louis

That's really interesting. So it's about this kind of consensus building around science as much as it is the actual experiments that are going on.

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Sophie

Absolutely. They infiltrate all aspects of science, conduct, design and reporting.

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Louis

I think that's an interesting point to touch on for some listeners, the idea of science maybe, well it's what happens in a white coat in a lab, but it sounds like there's this, you know, kind of wider concept of science. Maybe you could just briefly explain some of that. So we've got the kind of experimental side, but then, you know, things like publishing and, you know, even institutions.

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Sophie

Yeah, sure. So again, I think that's a great question. Many listeners will think it's as simple as you design a study, get approval for it, run the study, published the results. But the scientific process is incredibly complicated. And that's why the industry can employ so many tactics to influence it at all stages. You know, right from conception, the industry might try to influence what research questions are you asking?

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And can they be framed in a way to guarantee positive outcomes for the company? Then you've got the design. You know, they might try to influence the types of participants who are recruited in these studies, again, to try and ensure that favourable outcomes are had in the results. Then, of course, the actual conduct itself. You know, we saw, with Philip Morris, that they were collecting some spurious samples in one of its clinical trials that was reported in Reuters about five or so years ago.

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Again, to try and skew the data in its favour. And then publication, wow that's complicated. They can be published in all sorts of ways. So most people think of peer-reviewed literature. That's when academics or the industry can submit their written up research to a journal. The journal will then send them out to other experts in the field to review your paper amongst its peers.

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You know, to try and improve it, make it a stronger paper, and check for any errors. Well, the industry can do this less and less because a lot of journals are saying, hey, we can see what you do and we can't trust you to publish, to produce robust and unbiased research. And so then the industry is looking at other avenues.

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They'll use things like non peer-review publications, preprints for example, which can literally just be stuck up online. They've got their own science websites full of their own telling of their own science that no independent person has reviewed at all. And then they'll go to conferences and to, events where they'll present on this data, again, without any sort of independent oversight as to whether it's, you know, biased or robust or objective.

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Louis

So do you think, just talking about some of those new forms of publishing, do you think the new ways in which we all communicate social media, the internet, do you think that's having an influence on this problem?

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Sophie

Certainly. Certainly. The main aim of the industry when it comes to this science dissemination is firstly to influence policy, but also we're seeing increasingly that they're using it in direct marketing to consumers. You go to any of their product websites and you will see claims like, science, you know, supports this product as being a healthier alternative to cigarettes.

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You know, they really are promoting their own science as having supporting their marketing claims. And that's really influential to consumers. We're seeing that it's having an effect. More and more consumers are using newer products because of the claims of the industry that they're less harmful, for example, than cigarettes.

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Louis

I think we're talking a lot here about some contemporary examples, and some of that might be surprising to people because people hear about the tobacco industry and they think of the past and of claims about cancer. So it's fascinating to hear that a lot of, a lot of that conduct is very much still ongoing. But perhaps to set the scene a bit, we should go back into the past and talk about some of the history of how tobacco companies have tried to influence science.

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Have you got any examples from previous decades that illustrate this point?

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Sophie

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, there's an endless pool that I could pull from. Lots of people, I think, sometimes forget just how egregious these tactics have been in the past from the tobacco industry. And they really did write the playbook on influencing science as far back as the 1950s, for example, they were using a number of these tactics.

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So, take a look at the Frank Statement, a great example for people to go and look up, which was from 1954. This was essentially a letter-like sort of advert that they ran as part of a campaign where the tobacco industry, along with some PR companies, were trying to combat emerging evidence that smoking was linked to lung cancer.

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And in this, my goodness, practically every single tactic that we know of is evidenced there, you know, everything from trying to create industry coalitions. So in this, for example, we had all of the tobacco companies coming together to publish this advert, which is really rare, right? They're competitors, why on earth would they work together? That's how serious they took this.

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They do things like trying to create front groups that seem independent. They even were trying to create sort of scientific echo chambers. They were attacking and misrepresenting all this unfavourable science around lung cancer and smoking. They even said in this, letter, oh, well, you know, the evidence on smoking being linked to lung cancer is just on some mice and rats.

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That absolutely wasn't the case. It was in humans. It was epidemiological research as strong as we can pretty much get.

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Louis

And did they know that this was the case?

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Sophie

Oh, absolutely. They're very clever in how they misrepresent an attack. They're trying to get the public on board. They're trying to oversimplify, they're trying to misconstrue and sort of spread a rhetoric that's desirable to them.

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Louis

You mentioned the word echo chambers. That's something we hear quite a lot of these days. What do you mean by this in this context?

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Sophie

Yeah. So, the echo chamber effect is essentially what happens when the industry's own favourable science and messaging is widely disseminated and amplified, bounced around essentially, the groups that it wants to try and influence. And at the same time, they'll also try to hide within those same circles unfavourable science to the industry. And this is all sort of achieved through that strategy we talked about earlier, the influencing over the reach of science, essentially controlling what information goes where and to who you.

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Louis

So you mentioned tobacco companies also self-publish on their own websites. Can you tell me a bit more about that? Are they upfront about the fact that they are a tobacco company publishing this science?

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Sophie

It's not always straightforward. Sometimes it is clear, you know, when they're publishing on their own websites. One would hope that it's quite clear that it's them. You know, it's BATscience.com. It's PMIscience.com. They're being quite transparent about where that research has come from. But that's not always the case. They will try and hide research that has actually come from them.

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So for example, they might use third parties. So take the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, which is essentially a sort of industry lobbying group that represents itself as totally independent, but in fact is entirely funded by Philip Morris International. And a lot of what the Foundation has published and promoted is very industry favourable.

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Louis

So I know that here at the Tobacco Control Research Group there's been quite a lot of work done trying to understand this environment of science influencing. Could you give us an example of some of that research that's happening here at Bath?

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Sophie

Yeah, I can give you, I guess, the example. So, a shout out to, to my colleagues, Drs. Tess Legg and Jenny Hatchard, as well as Professor Anna Gilmore, who a few years ago published what they called the Science for Profit Model. And essentially what that did is encapsulate in, in one typology, all the known strategies to influence science that have been used by the tobacco and other industries through the past decades.

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And what they did is, they came up with, they really broke it down into detail. There were tons of strategies that they found. But on the whole, they summarised these into sort of five main strategies, which were all around, firstly, influencing the conduct and publication of science. So essentially what the research is, what it measures, what it doesn't, what research is undertaken versus hidden away or not undertaken and what's published and not published, all in an effort to try and skew the evidence base. If they can't influence the conduct and publication, they might try to influence your interpretation of that research and the science in order to essentially undermine unfavourable

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science, or to make you think that the independent and or unfavourable science is bad in some way, and also try and create this distorted picture of the evidence base that looks very favourable to the industry. They'll also, you know, maximise industry friendly messaging while minimising unfriendly messaging. So anything that gives them any sort of favour, they'll heavily disseminate and promote, and anything that doesn't, they'll try to suppress, essentially creating this echo chamber effect.

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And then also it's important to remember that science is fundamental to policy. And so they're also trying to influence policy and the use of science in policymaking, which is all achieved by trying to embed standards of evidence into policymaking processes that essentially make policymakers reliant on the tobacco industry science to try and pass policy.

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Louis

So you've discussed a few of the tactics, I suppose, then that make up this model. Did you see some of these present in the case you spoke about before with Philip Morris Japan and this whistleblower?

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Sophie

Absolutely. In fact, for anyone who hasn't read the paper, we used the Science for Profit Model as sort of a coding book to help categorise all the activities that we saw in the Philip Morris Japan files. And my goodness, we found so many examples, many in the categories that I've just explained.

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Louis

So ultimately they're applying these tactics for profit, right? So in this Japan example, what was their profit motive, where were they making their money?

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Sophie

Well, take for example, one of the activities I've not flagged yet was, Philip Morris Japan were covertly funding some academics at a Japanese university to conduct research that they said was going to be on cessation tools.

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Louis

And what does that mean?

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Sophie

Essentially, any products or interventions that help aid smokers quit using cigarettes. Now that's quite broad. And the company, Philip Morris Japan, recognised that but in the emails they were like, no, actually we still want to fund this research because we think it could be beneficial to the company and, to quote, public health. In reality, they actually used that very research to try and create a favourable environment for its cigarette alternatives,

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it's Heated Tobacco Products, particularly IQOS.

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Louis

So they're using the language of this public health intervention to actually promote specific products that that company owns.

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Sophie

Yeah. Exactly that. All research can be used in a way of, sort of calling back to what I mentioned earlier about not just the conduct of research being manipulated but the use to, anything that the industry can use to try and sell more products, it will.

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Louis

And so this new product, IQOS, you mention, could you explain what that is?

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Sophie

Yeah. Of course. For my UK and Western listeners, you might not have heard of Heated Tobacco Products, but they are incredibly popular, particularly in Asia. Heated Tobacco Products, are

essentially a novel product. The latest wave of Heated Tobacco Products has only been around about the last ten years or so and they've really taken off.

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I mean, the market is huge now. And Heated Tobacco Products are often misconstrued for e-cigarettes, and they do look very similar. So like an e-cigarette, a Heated Tobacco Product has like an electronic element, almost like a mini oven. And then then there's a separate tobacco element that's inserted into the electronic element and as the name suggests, heats the tobacco.

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And it's that presence of tobacco that distinguishes it from e-cigarettes. And it's the electronic heating element that distinguishes it from cigarettes.

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Louis

So these have actual tobacco leaf in them, unlike something like a vape.

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Sophie

Yes. Exactly that. And they are being promoted around the world by the major tobacco companies as these smoke free, reduced risk alternatives to cigarettes, despite the evidence not necessarily being that sound.

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Louis

So we've got these Heated Tobacco Products and other new products like e-cigarettes. What are some of these science influencing tactics being applied to this new generation of products?

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Sophie

Well, I think the Philip Morris Japan case that we've just talked about highlights a lot of how these tactics are being employed – you know influencing conduct and reach of science and trying to conceal those activities. But in addition to that, I've actually done quite a lot of work on the clinical trials that have been conducted on Heated Tobacco Products in particular, and clinical trials for those who don't know, is essentially interventional studies done in human participants where the human participant will be given an intervention,

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so in this case would be the Heated Tobacco Product. And another group will be given a comparator, so typically cigarettes, e-cigarettes, cessation aids. And then you compare the effects seen in those human participants. And looking at that clinical trial data, it's apparent to me that the industry has successfully managed to influence the conduct and design and the reporting of those trials.

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So, for example, despite marketing these products as being less harmful alternatives, actually, the Heated Tobacco Product clinical trials are really short term. Most of them are five days or less. They're also only measuring them in healthy adult smokers, you know, not youth or nonsmokers or older people who might be interested in quitting smoking because they've had the onset of disease and we also know that they're at a high risk of bias.

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That is to say that when we examined the studies, we found that there were some aspect and factors that meant that bias could have been introduced. So, for example, the big one in the industry's trials is selective reporting. And what I mean by that is when they publish their studies, they'll publish just some of the data and they'll keep other bits of data back, sometimes never publishing them at all.

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And that, of course, creates this distorted picture. How can we form an accurate interpretation on the health effects of Heated Tobacco Products if we can't see all the data?

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Louis

That's really interesting. I've heard similar with the pharmaceutical industry, for example. Maybe that's a good opportunity to talk about, some of these tactics presumably extend beyond tobacco. What other industries use these kind of corporate tactics?

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Sophie

Oh, yeah. I know we've talked a lot just now about Philip Morris International and tobacco companies, but it really isn't just the major tobacco companies that are influencing science. Evidence continues to emerge that indicates the wider nicotine and tobacco industry, so things like, companies, that are selling e-cigarettes or nicotine pouches, as well as other industries, you know,

everything from alcohol, chemicals, fossil fuels, food and beverage, gambling, pharma, they're all doing it too.

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Louis

Okay, so that makes it sound like a massive problem, to be honest for us to address as a society. What are some of the solutions to this? What changes can we make to science?

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Sophie

Yeah, it is a really tricky one. There's no straightforward answer, but I think, there are lots of things that we can try to do and encourage. Firstly is things like this. It's education, spreading the word. It's really important that policymakers, regulators, journalists, academics and the public are aware of what the industry is doing so that they are equipped to make informed choices and decisions.

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In fact, actually, on that point, myself and some other colleagues in Tobacco Control Research Group have actually developed training for academics at the University on this very issue to try and raise awareness that we're hoping that we can repeat in years to come. The other thing that is actually quite a simple change is transparency. So the tobacco industry and other industries get away with many of these tactics because they can conceal them.

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And so things like ensuring that they have to accurately declare the studies they are funding, what conflicts of interest they have, and not just in academic outputs, because, many people might not be aware, but on most academic papers there will be usually conflict of interest and or funding statements that have to be provided that tell you where the research is coming from.

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But that's not the case on, say, news articles or social media posts. And so it really needs to be ubiquitous, the transparency needs to be ubiquitous. The next two a slightly harder. So, governance. We have seen, as I mentioned, from my own research, the bias science will continue to emerge, particularly as regulatory agencies and governments use it in their decision making.

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And so unbiased research will only emerge if such bodies require it and stop relying on the industry science to make these life changing decisions. And then lastly, this idea has been thrown around a

while by colleagues in the tobacco control space, but we're not seeing great implementation, and so it's really important we encourage this, is the implementation of novel funding models whereby the huge profits and the vast research and development resources at the industry's fingertips are distributed via an independent governing body to unbiased researchers.

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And so, therefore, we would end up with research that is broken away from the tobacco industry, thereby limiting the influence that they can have over it.

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Louis

So this would be a global model presumably.

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Sophie

Ideally, yes.

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Louis

So how would how would that work in practice.

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Sophie

There are lots of different proposals around this. I highly recommend, looking at Joanna Cohen's research on this but you can do things like implement a tax, for example, which we know is one of the best ways to tackle the tobacco industry. And then money from that tax can then go towards funding the studies necessary for governance bodies and regulatory bodies to be able to make informed decisions for policy and regulation.

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Louis

Do you see this as something that could maybe even be expanded beyond tobacco to other industries too?

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Sophie

Absolutely. It's vital that we look across the industries when implementing solutions. It's, as I've said, not just the tobacco industry, it's many other industries. And so any solutions that will apply to all will be working much better in favour of public health.

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Louis

And just to wrap things up, in your personal view, do you feel, working in this field, do you feel hopeful about these solutions?

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Sophie

Yes. Yeah, I think I think so. We're seeing progress. So for example, you know, publishers are restricting or completely banning publishing tobacco industry science. We're seeing greater use, as I've said before, the conflict of interest and funding statements to increase transparency. We ourselves are developing education, and we're seeing universities develop, you know, policies around trying to restrict the influence that certain corporate actors have on the sciences conducted at them.

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But we are far from an end. You know, ultimately, a lot more needs to be done.

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Louis

Dr. Sophie Braznell, thank you very much for joining us.

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Sophie

Thank you so much for having me.

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Louis

The sources for today's discussion can be found in the episode shownotes for those who want to see them. This was the final episode of the first season of Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco. We'll

be back with season two, where we'll continue to challenge deadly industries. But for now, thank you for listening. From the Tobacco Control Research Group, you've been listening to Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco, hosted by Louis Laurence,

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produced by Kate White and edited by Sacha Goodwin. The production manager is Jacqueline Oliver. You can email us at tobacco-admin@bath.ac.uk or find us on LinkedIn and Bluesky. This is a University of Bath production.