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Tobacco giant hid harmful research

Sarah Boseley Health editor

The tobacco company Philip Morris secretly acquired a research facility to find out about the toxic effects of cigarette smoke and went to great lengths to conceal that it knew what was going on there, it was revealed last night.

For years, the tobacco industry claimed it was unaware of research showing cigarette smoke was dangerous to health. By the 1970s, according to a paper published online by the Lancet medical journal last night, Philip Morris had decided it needed the information.

But Philip Morris did not want this known, according to Martin McKee of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and colleagues.

The US-based company acquired a research institute in Germany, the Institut für Industrielle und Biologische Forschung GmbH (INBIFO). Industry documents archived as a result of US tobacco litigation reveal that vice-president Helmut Wakeham in 1970 advocated buying it as "a locale where we might do some of the things which we are reluctant to do in this country".

Earlier that year, he had

written in a memo to the chairman and chief executive officer, Joseph F Cullman: "Let's face it. We are interested in evidence which we believe denies the allegation that cigarette smoking causes disease."

Philip Morris bought INBIFO through a Swiss intermediary and set up a complex communication system, appointing a coordinator and intermediary from the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, paid for by a subsidiary of Philip Morris.

A memo from 1977 in which a senior company executive

reprimanded a researcher for suggesting samples be sent direct to INBIFO indicates how sensitive the relationship was: "We have gone to great pains to eliminate any written contact with INBIFO."

What was published, say the authors, "appears to differ considerably from what was not".

"In particular, the unpublished reports provided evidence that second-hand smoke is even more harmful than mainstream smoke, a finding of particular relevance given the industry's continuing denial of the harmful effects of passive smoking."

