

Tobacco giant says 'no cover-up'

A tobacco firm has said allegations it covered up evidence of the harmful effects of passive smoking are "false, inaccurate and highly misleading".

A paper in the Lancet alleges Philip Morris hid investigations and declined to publish evidence on the risks.

The claims relate to work carried out by a German research facility acquired by the company in the 1970s.

But a spokesman for Philip Morris said the Lancet claims were "highly distorted".

We disagree with the allegations that are made [in the Lancet] - they are false, inaccurate and highly misleading
John Wunderli, Philip Morris

Professor Martin McKee from the UK's London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and colleagues Pascal Diethelm and Jean-Charles Rielle from Switzerland examined documents which were made public after a 1998 legal settlement in the US.

The Master Settlement Agreement required leading tobacco companies to publish millions of internal documents.

Following their investigation, the researchers say Phillip Morris used the research facility to carry out studies into the health effects of tobacco smoke from the early 1970s onwards.

They claim the tobacco manufacturer took measures to ensure the work done in the facility could not be linked back to the company.

Professor McKee and colleagues accuse the scientists involved in the research of being selective in their publication of results.

However, John Wunderli from Philip Morris said: "The allegations that are made in this article are highly distorted and ones that we have seen for years in our litigation here in the US."

He added: "Importantly, also, the purpose for the article seems to be at the end that the public should be aware of the health effects of second hand smoke, environmental tobacco smoke (ETS), on issues about involving further restrictions on smoking."

He said Philip Morris agreed with that point, but deferred to the public health authorities on the issue of whether environmental tobacco smoke caused disease.

Mr Wunderli added: "Although we disagree with the allegations that are made [in the Lancet] - they are false, inaccurate and highly misleading - we don't disagree with the underlying conclusion.

"That is that people should be guided by what public health community says on the issue of the hazards of second hand smoke when deciding on whether to be around smoke or whether

to smoke around others or whether further reasonable restrictions on public smoking are warranted."

'Selected publication'

Professor McKie and his colleagues say: "The scientists involved appear to have published only a small amount of their research and what was published 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.

"By contrast, much of its published work comprises papers that seek to cast doubt on methods used to assess the effects of passive smoking," they said.

Professor McKee said it was essential that those involved in reviewing evidence on smoking and health should be aware of "what appears to be the selective nature of what is eventually published by some scientists with links to the industry, and the evidence that sometimes mechanisms appear to have been used to disguise these links."

Lancet Editor Richard Horton said: "Given the continuing debate about the way governments should respond to calls for a ban on smoking in public places, we have published this work early online to inform that discussion as a matter of urgency."

Ministers in England will outline plans on smoking policy in the government white paper on public health, which is expected in the coming weeks.

Earlier on Wednesday, ministers announced that smoking would be banned in public places in Scotland by spring 2006.

Story from BBC NEWS:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/health/4000417.stm>

Published: 2004/11/11 10:39:57 GMT

© BBC MMVI