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TOBACCO INDUSTRY

Website to lift lid on inside story at BAT

By Lisa Urquhart

A website launched today will allow members of the public to examine the internal workings of British American Tobacco down to the smallest detail.

The site's organisers say it includes evidence of BAT's efforts to thwart anti-smoking initiatives, and has documents relating to international smuggling.

The information is being published to coincide with the release of BAT's third quarter results.

The site - a joint project between the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; the University of California, San Francisco; and the Mayo Clinic, a US medical not-for-profit group - will give access to more than 1m pages of internal memos, research and reports relating to the activities of BAT from the early 1940s to 1995.

Kelley Lee, senior lecturer at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and one of the project's co-ordinators, said the launch marked a milestone

in public information relating to smoking. "Now people will have access to all this information 24 hours a day and for free," she said.

The Guildford Archiving Project started out as a means of expanding public access to internal documents which BAT was forced to establish in 1998, following litigation brought by the State of Minnesota and Minnesota Blue Cross Shield.

The project has cost £1.6m and taken almost five years to complete, as each page of hundreds of files has been scanned and placed on the website.

Prior to the launch of the site, members of the public who wanted to access BAT's files had to travel to the group's depository in Guildford, Surrey.

The site founders say the online archive will eliminate some of the more obtrusive elements to a visit to Guildford. There have been concerns that BAT lawyers are able to track visitors' searches of the archive.

Derek Yach, professor of public health at Yale University, said the archive was

important because it had already shown how health policy had been influenced by tobacco groups through lobbying.

"It gives us important lessons on how we can work with companies because of the many tactics they use to delay or thwart policy," he said.

Levels of disclosure could influence the behaviour of other large businesses, he added. "The corporations will realise that they have to be cleaner because it could be them next."

Deborah Arnott, director of Action on Smoking and Health, described the project as "crucial", because the public could lose its access to the archive in 2009.

She said: "It's very clear that once there is no legal requirement for the archive it will be closed down."

BAT said it remained unconcerned about the site as the records had been available to the public for many years at Guildford.

The online archive can be accessed at www.bat.library.ucsf.edu

