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GASP of Colorado
Group to Alleviate Smoking Pollution

Promoting smoke-free policies since 1977.

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Internal Documents Reveal Tobacco Industry Knew Dangers of Secondhand Smoke Since the Mid-1970's

There has been much publicity about the release of thousands of pages of internal documents from the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation (B& W) showing that the tobacco industry knew the addictive nature of cigarettes for more than 30 years. A recently published book titled "The Cigarette Papers" provides an analysis of these internal documents and reveals much more about how the tobacco industry has mislead the American public. According to the book, the documents also reveal that the B & W and BAT (British American Tobacco Company):

• Added filters to cigarettes in the 1950's as a public relations tool to "lull the public into a false sense of security regarding the health effects of smoking" in the wake of growing scientific research that smoking causes cancer.

• Tried to develop a safer cigarette when its own studies showed that cigarettes contained toxic components. When that failed they "turned to a more defensive public relations posture of creating a false controversy about the scientific evidence that smoking is dangerous."

• Used lawyers in guiding scientific research to circumvent the dispersal of health-related documents that might create problems with product liability, public relations, and new regulations.

The book also reveals that research by these tobacco companies indicated that environmental tobacco smoke is hazardous. As part of GASP of Colorado's educational efforts, we are reprinting the key revelations about environmental tobacco smoke from this important book.

Reading the book is like reading a spy novel that unravels clue after clue leading to the murder suspect. **To obtain the book call toll-free 800-777-4726** (Visa & Mastercard accepted). The Internet version and 8,000 pages of source documents are available through http: www.library.ucsf.edu/tobacco.

Common abbreviations used this article: BAT (British American Tobacco), B & W (Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company) CTR (Center for Tobacco research), ETS (Environmental Tobacco Smoke), R & D (Research & Development).

Tobacco Industry Knew About the Dangers of Secondhand Smoke

The chapter on environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) concludes that privately, B&W and BAT have conducted internal research on environmental tobacco smoke, most of which has supported the conclusion that ETS is dangerous to health. The reports from BAT's annual research conferences show that BAT has identified harmful substances in sidestream smoke, including glycoproteins and tobacco-specific N-nitrosamines. In addition, the reports imply that sidestream smoke was "biologically active," and therefore potentially carcinogenic, in BAT's laboratory tests. BAT researchers were working throughout the 1980's to develop a new cigarette that would emit less sidestream smoke.

In contrast, the documents also show that, in their public pronouncements, B&W, BAT, and the tobacco industry in general have actively sought to mislead the public about the dangers of passive smoking. BAT's conference reports state that BAT and B&W were engaged in research to "refute the evidence" that passive smoking is dangerous. In addition, US tobacco companies jointly funded "special projects" related to ETS. In at least one case, data from a special project were apparently falsified to make passive smoking appear less harmful than it actually is. Also, according to its conference reports, BAT had a policy of "no disclosure" regarding internal research on the health effects of ETS. The tobacco industry has also publicly attacked scientific research on ETS in order to "create a controversy" over the evidence that passive smoking is dangerous. In at least on case, it publicly attacked research that its own consultants had privately acknowledged was valid.

Finally, the tobacco industry has actively sought to block efforts to minimize the exposure of nonsmokers to tobacco smoke. Although the industry states publicly that it is motivated by a dedication to freedom of choice, its true motivation is maintenance of profits. The documents also unravel the tobacco industry's strategy of using every conceivable public relations smokescreen to avoid discussing the secondhand smoke's health hazards when smoking restrictions are being considered.

Taken together, the documents demonstrate that the tobacco industry's strategy regarding passive smoking has been virtually identical to its strategy regarding active smoking. It has privately conducted internal research, which has largely supported the evidence that passive smoking is dangerous to health, while it has publicly denied that the dangers have been proven.

Decades of Deception & The Smoking Guns

1973

A March 15, 1973 document notes that passive smoking is a growing issue of concern to the industry because of the negative impact that increased regulation will have on the social acceptability of smoking. The document discussed the increasing emphasis on smoking habits of employees and occupational exposure; increasing correlations between passive smoking with heart and lung disease that are associated with community air pollution; and that smoking is increasingly being pictured as socially unacceptable.

This document reflects themes that the tobacco industry has used for over two decades when dealing with secondhand smoke: it has argued that cigarette smoke is "taking the rap" for environmental pollution and that people concerned about secondhand smoke are "zealots."

However, the scientific and medical communities are well aware that environmental toxins such as radon and asbestos are hazardous to health. They also are aware of the large body of scientific evidence indicating that exposure to environmental tobacco smoke can cause disease as well.

1974-5

During the early 1970's concern over ETS was focused on its irritating effects. At the BAT research conference held in Merano, Italy, in April 1975, BAT scientists discussed passive smoking at length. Participants agreed that research into the irritating effects of sidestream smoke should be undertaken. The minutes from the meeting said, "It is desirable to be in a position to anticipate the identification of new sidestream constituents which may be considered harmful to nonsmokers." **BAT's scientists made this statement nearly a decade before the general scientific community had recognized ETS as a serious threat to public health**.

1976

By the mid-1970's the scientific community had begun to identify toxic substances such as carbon monoxide and N-nitrosamines in sidestream smoke. In addition, Carl Becker, a researcher at Cornell University, had published a series of studies on glycoproteins in tobacco smoke. Glycoproteins are a class of proteins that often induce allergic reactions.

Decades of Deception & The Smoking Guns

Becker's first study showed that glycoprotein isolated from tobacco could produce allergic reactions in some individuals. His report caught the attention of BAT researchers, who discussed his findings at a biological research meeting held on October 14, 1976, in Southampton. The minutes of the meeting note that BAT scientists at Southhampton had repeated Becker's experiments and had confirmed that glycoprotein is present in mainstream smoke. The researchers agreed that the studies should be repeated for sidestream smoke.

1977

Becker published a second study on tobacco glycoproteins in 1977. This study showed that glycoproteins from tobacco increase the formation of clots in human blood, and he concluded that tobacco glycoproteins "may be important to the pathogenesis of cardiovascular and pulmonary diseases associated with cigarette smoking". Becker's findings were reported in the New York Times.

This study was funded by CTR and Robert Hockett, the scientific director stated in a memo that he was unhappy with Becker's publication. While CTR was attempting to distance itself from Becker's findings, tobacco industry lawyers and scientists took his findings very seriously, and had lawyers hire a scientist to repeat Becker's experiments. Scientists at BAT also repeated Becker's experiments and replicated his results. They adopted a defensive posture, however, regarding the implications of their research.

The Cigarette papers authors point out that "It is noteworthy that BAT had confirmed the presence of a potentially dangerous substance in sidestream smoke as early as 1977."

1978

In March 1978 BAT's research toward environmental tobacco smoke shifted from glycoproteins to nitrosamines. BAT executives also began to realize that the passive smoking issue represented a potential new commercial opportunity for the company.

Nitrosamines are potent carcinogens. Tobacco contains several types of tobacco-specific N-nitrosamines (TSNA), most of which are by-products of nicotine formed during the curing, fermentation, aging, and burning of tobacco. TSNA cause a variety of cancers - most notably lung cancer - in laboratory animals, and most researchers today believe that they are one of the primary causes of many tobacco-induced cancers in humans.

BAT was actively engaged in measuring levels on nitrosamines in both mainstream and sidestream smoke by late 1970's. While BAT scientists acknowledged that nitrosamines in sidestream smoke could present a problem for the industry, they also began to realize during the late 1970's that the passive smoking issue could be used to their advantage. The report from the 1978 Sydney conference indicates a growing awareness that BAT could capitalize on the growing anti-smoking sentiment by developing a new cigarette with less irritating sidestream smoke.

1979

The tobacco industry was concerned that government agencies would use the nitrosamine issue to impose further regulations on tobacco products. At a R&D policy conference held in the United Kingdom on February 10 to 14, 1979 the industry would attempt to show that nitrosamine levels in all cigarettes were below the "safe level," thus preventing government regulation of cigarettes based on their nitrosamine content. On the other hand, the industry also realized that any mention of a "measured number" could be dangerous because it would be an explicit admission that tobacco smoke contains hazardous substances.

1980

By 1980 BAT's researchers were trying to develop a cigarette with low sidestream smoke emission at a research conference held in Sea Island, Georgia on September 15 to 18, 1980.

While Bat's scientists were quietly conducting research on sidestream smoke, in the 80's the general scientific community was becoming increasingly aware that passive smoking could cause a variety of diseases, including lung cancer. In 1981 a large epidemiological study on the relationship between passive smoking and lung cancer was published by Dr. Takeshi Hirayama. The study showed that nonsmoking women married to smokers were more likely to develop lung cancer than nonsmoking women married to nonsmokers. The Hirayama study received a great deal of publicity and was criticized vehemently by the tobacco industry. Shortly after the publication of Hirayama's paper, BAT began to study the "biological activity" of sidestream smoke. The tobacco industry uses the term "biological activity" as a euphemism for carcinogenicity and other adverse health effects.

1981

A document describing BAT's proposed research program for 1982-84 shows BAT was studying the "specific activity" of sidestream smoke. This indicates that BAT was concerned about studies suggesting that ETS is carcinogenic and that it was attempting to measure the carcinogenicity of ETS in laboratory tests. One of BAT's primary techniques for minimizing sidestream smoke was to use new cigarette papers.

1982

The documents summary of a paper written by Dr. Ian Ayres of BAT GR&DC at a 1982 conference indicates that BAT was attempting to develop a sophisticated understanding of the health effects of passive smoking and the public's attitude toward environmental tobacco smoke. BAT planned to use some of its data to "counter anti-smoking attacks," while data supporting the evidence that ETS is dangerous would be withheld from the public. This is the same strategy that the tobacco industry has employed regarding active smoking.

Decades of Deception & The Smoking Guns

1983

To start 1983, BAT's primary objective in conducting research on environmental tobacco smoke was to develop a new cigarette that produced less sidestream smoke. However, by the end of 1983 BAT had added a second primary objective to its ETS research program: to gather scientific data to refute the evidence that passive smoking is dangerous to health.

A document written by W.D.E. Irwin of BAT GR&DC and titled "Sidestream Research" confirms that BAT's main priorities for ETS research during the mid-1980's were to develop a low-sidestream cigarette and to conduct defensive research.

It is noteworthy that BAT appeared more concerned with the irritative aspect of smoke than with whether passive smoking is dangerous to health. Its interest in health appeared to be limited to refuting any claims made by others about the effects of exposure to ETS.

At BAT's 1983 conference in Rio, a meeting summary suggests that BAT's scientists believed sidestream smoke could be biologically active, that is, carcinogenic. In addition, it implies that they were hoping to create a new product with less carcinogenic sidestream smoke, just as they had initially hoped to create a "safe" cigarette for active smokers.

The summary of this conference also refers to several contracts being negotiated to develop special cigarette papers that would reduce sidestream smoke emissions. The use of slow-burning cigarette paper could serve a dual purpose: reducing sidestream emissions and creating a self-extinguishing cigarette, which would be less likely to set accidental fires. In addition, the participants agreed that defensive research should continue.

1984

In 1984 BAT was also monitoring levels of smoke in public places such as bars. Tests of human uptake of various smoke components as well as tests for odor and irritation were also being performed. Among the projects undertaken in 1984 was a study of whether nonsmokers' reactions to environmental tobacco smoke might be affected more by the actions of smokers than by the smoke itself. This and similar work may have contributed to current tobacco industry activities to create a "smokers' rights" movement and to provide social support for smokers.

A Southampton conference discussed a "low sidestream / ameliorated aroma product" to preempt potential volume decline from smokers under pressure in social and work environments.

This statement indicates that the motivation behind BAT's effort to develop a low-sidestream cigarette was profit rather than public health. The goal was to keep smokers smoking even though acceptance of smoking in public places was declining. The conference attendees rated this project as having "large market potential, high behavioral validation (evidence of need) but potentially high associated risks to the business."

The reports from BAT's annual research conferences demonstrate that BAT's internal research efforts supported the conclusion that environmental tobacco smoke is dangerous to health. BAT had shown in its own laboratories that sidestream smoke contains toxic substances, such as nitrosamines, and that sidestream smoke was "biologically active," and therefore potentially carcinogenic. Publicly, however, BAT and the other tobacco companies have denied that ETS is dangerous.

Public Attacks and Private Acceptance of ETS Research

One of the techniques used by the tobacco industry to counter the evidence that passive smoking is dangerous is to fund scientific research specifically designed to "refute claims about the health effects of passive smoking". The industry also has funded special projects related to ETS through CTR. CTR special projects were funded at the request of tobacco industry lawyers, and their purpose was to generate data that could be used on the tobacco industry's behalf.

The Hirayama Affair

Another technique that the tobacco industry has used to create a controversy surrounding the passive smoking issue is to attack published research on ETS. The documents show that, in at least one case, the industry has even criticized research that some of its own consultants acknowledged was valid.

In 1981 Takeshi Hirayama published a major study indicating that lung cancer could be caused by passive smoking as well as active smoking. The study, which was published in the British Medical Journal, received international attention. The tobacco industry responded by launching a public relations campaign to discredit Hirayama's work. The Tobacco Institute hired Nathan Mantel, a well-known epidemiologist, to critique the study, and it then cited Mantel's criticisms in a press release that was widely reported. The institute also published several critical news articles as full-page ads in newspapers and magazines.

The documents show that, although the tobacco industry was publicly attacking Hirayama's paper, several of its own experts were privately admitting that his conclusions were valid. In addition, the scientific community, widely regards Hirayama's work as a landmark study on the health effects of ETS, and his findings have been confirmed by several other studies showing a link between passive smoking and lung cancer.

This episode indicates that the tobacco industry is not committed to learning and disseminating the truth about the health effects of its products. Rather, it has consistently attempted to discredit research even when its own scientists have admitted that the research results are valid. Just as the industry has continued to deny that active smoking has been proven dangerous to health, it continues to deny that the case is proven against passive smoking.