

Secret documents show tobacco industry's plans to stop smoking ban

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

US researchers have used secret tobacco industry documents to show for the first time how the industry tried to use political pressure to delay or stop the Environmental Protection Agency from issuing a risk assessment on passive smoking. The 1992 assessment showed that second hand cigarette smoke had adverse respiratory effects, especially on children, and estimated that it caused 3000 deaths from lung cancer a year among non-smokers (*American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 2004;26:167-77).

Most of the industry's tactics failed, but it took until 2002 before a lawsuit launched by the industry in a federal court was overturned and the agency's assessment fully vindicated. Before that the tactics of a Republican representative, Thomas Bliley, succeeded in putting the assessment under a cloud. He charged that it was based on faulty science and that the agency used flawed proce-

dures. As a result, the industry was successful in delaying the agency's report for more than a decade.

The congressional district that Mr Bliley represented includes Richmond, Virginia, where Philip Morris had a large cigarette plant. In 1983 he wrote to a then vice president of the Philip Morris company, telling him he could count on Mr Bliley to do all he could to help fight "the war on tobacco."

Dr Richard Hurt, director of the Mayo Clinic Nicotine Dependence Center and an author of the recent article, said, "This is the first report showing how a single member of Congress, in conjunction with his staff, tobacco industry attorneys, and executives, worked very aggressively to advance the tobacco industry's interests."

Craig Fuller, senior vice president of corporate affairs at the tobacco company Philip Morris and former chief of staff for George Bush (the current presi-

dent's father) when he was vice president, described to his board of directors a strategy designed to "slow down the environmental tobacco smoke risk assessment" of the agency.

Dr Hurt said that the documents forming the basis of the article show that "the tobacco industry will expend whatever effort is necessary to protect itself from public health policy that would adversely affect cigarette consumption."

The documents were made

public through litigation in the United States and are now available in the United States at the Minnesota tobacco document depository and in the United Kingdom at the British American Tobacco (BAT) document depository in London.

The article's authors say that the issuance of the Environmental Protection Agency's assessment "is widely viewed as a seminal event in the development of the movement to create smoke-free indoor air." □



New Yorkers celebrated the first anniversary on 25 March of their city's ban on smoking in business places

US bans doctors from conference in Cuba

Lynn Eaton *London*

US medics and scientists are furious at a decision by the US government to refuse them licences to attend an international medical conference in Cuba last month, despite the fact that in previous years such visits had been allowed.

The conference on coma and death is held every four years in Havana—this year from 9 to 12 March. It had become one of the best international conferences on the subject, according to Professor Stuart Younger from the Department of Bioethics, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, who had been due to attend and present a paper on attitudes of the US public to brain death.

"I attended the 1992, 1996,

and 2000 meetings with no trouble from the US government," he said. "Approximately 70 scientists and scholars from the USA were poised to go when the Office of Foreign Assets Control sent letters to all of us who planned to attend threatening us with fines or imprisonment."

Dr E Roy John, professor of psychiatry at New York University Medical School, was also refused a licence by the US authorities, although he too was due to present a paper, on persistent vegetative state.

"The implications for academic freedom are dreadful," he told the *BMJ*. "Even at the height of the cold war, the obstacles to the freedom of information exchange always came from the Soviet Union, not from the free world. We seem to be moving towards becoming the leaders of the not so free world."

"It seems quite clear to me that [this] is a gesture by the present administration to the Cuban-American voting block," he said.

President Bush is keen to win support among Cubans who

have fled to Miami and want to see more aggressive policies towards Cuba. Their support is considered crucial in winning the key Florida seat in the next presidential election.

Travel to Cuba by US citizens has been tightly controlled since Fidel Castro took power in 1959, but there has always been some provision for licensed people to travel, although interpretation of the Trading with the Enemy Act varies under each administration.

Although the conference on coma and death was endorsed by the World Federation of Neurology, it fell foul of the US trade restrictions because it was organised by a Cuban body. The US authorities also argued that attending a conference did not constitute "research," which is an acceptable reason for travel under the act.

Conference organiser Dr Calixto Machado, president of the Institute of Neurology and Neurosurgery in Havana, said he was "really upset" that the US delegates could not attend and had to rearrange the conference

programme at the last minute. "We welcomed 104 delegates from all continents," he said. "They also expressed their most sincere regrets for not welcoming the American delegates."

A spokeswoman from the Office of Foreign Assets Control, which is part of the US Department of the Treasury, defended the government's decision. Since October, she said, President George Bush has indicated his determination to stop US dollars going to Cuba. One of the department's concerns is that people ostensibly attending a conference might include some tourist visits, which would involve spending US dollars in the country.

"We need to make sure that conferences are meeting the proper guidelines to enable licensed travel," she said.

● The Academy of Sciences in Cuba has condemned the US government's decision to prohibit the publication of scientific works by Cubans in specialist journals published in the United States. □