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hboytchev@bmj.com

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## BMJ INVESTIGATION

# Medscape caves in on courses funded by tobacco giant Philip Morris, while medics fear global push into medical education

Clinic demonstrations, podcasts, and TV shows: **Hristio Boytchev** reveals how an ambitious deal between a leading medical education provider and the tobacco industry collapsed this week

Hristio Boytchev *investigations reporter*

The medical education provider Medscape has bowed to pressure and agreed to permanently remove a series of accredited medical education courses on smoking cessation funded by the tobacco industry giant Philip Morris International (PMI), *The BMJ* and *The Examination* have found. Medscape has acknowledged its “misjudgment” in a letter to complainants and says that it will not accept funding from any organisation affiliated with the tobacco industry in the future.

The move comes after a *BMJ* investigation revealed the PMI deal and widespread protests among doctors and academics in reaction to the partnership. Critics had said that the content tended to portray non-cigarette nicotine products as relatively harmless, therefore aligning with the commercial interests of PMI, which also sells e-cigarettes, nicotine pouches, and snus.<sup>1</sup>

An internal Medscape document seen by *The BMJ* and *The Examination* also hints at the true scale of the multimillion dollar deal between PMI and Medscape.<sup>[2]</sup> Medscape had planned to deliver 13 programmes under the deal—called the PMI Curriculum, according to the internal document. It had also planned podcasts and a “TV-like series.”

Other PMI funded programmes with different continuing medical education (CME) providers have also emerged, including in Saudi Arabia and South Africa, where a former World Medical Association president featured as a speaker. This apparent global push by the tobacco giant into certified medical education has been met with alarm and calls for certification bodies to issue a ban.

In response to the criticism a spokesperson for PMI told *The BMJ*, “Health agencies around the world have recognised the beneficial role that smoke-free products can play to improve public health. We are concerned that known special interest groups are actively blocking medical education that the US Food and Drug Administration and medical community have determined are needed. These actions stand to prolong use and possibly increase consumption of combustible cigarettes—the most harmful form of nicotine use.”

But Tim McAfee, professor (adjunct) at the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco, who is former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Office on Smoking and Health, called

PMI’s partnership with Medscape “the ultimate example of the fox not only signing up to guard the hen house but offering to sit on the eggs.” He added, “It is a perversion of ethics surrounding continuing medical education to allow the very companies that caused and profit from the continuing epidemic of tobacco related death and disease to be involved in any way.”

Pamela Ling, director of the Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education at the University of California, San Francisco, applauded Medscape for its U turn, adding that tobacco companies had a long history of using social scientists and other expert voices to normalise tobacco and nicotine use and to downplay the harms.<sup>3</sup> “However, the entry into the world of medical education is particularly audacious,” said Ling. “In the past, medical education sponsored by the manufacturers of the leading preventable cause of death would have been ridiculous. As tobacco companies remake their image into pharmaceutical-like nicotine purveyors, it appears they have been emboldened to enter this arena.”<sup>4 5</sup>

Nick Hopkinson, professor of respiratory medicine at Imperial College London, commented, “It’s astonishing, given the strict ethical codes that exist to exclude the tobacco industry, that Medscape thought that it would go unnoticed or be tolerated. They will need to undertake a thorough assessment as to how this appalling decision was made and ensure that policies and processes are in place to ensure that it cannot happen again.”

*The BMJ* contacted three Medscape employees, who reported widespread internal disappointment with the company’s decision to produce the courses. One said, “The programmes, and the way they were developed, distort scientific knowledge, crossing an ethical line that is made worse by the common knowledge of the tobacco industry’s role in hiding the dangers of its toxic products in the pursuit of profit. It’s also a departure from Medscape’s practice of presenting balanced, accurate, vetted content conveyed by expert faculty without ties to any related industry.”

The employees said that there had been no official internal communication on either the PMI deal or Medscape’s decision to drop the partnership in the face of protests.

An email sent by the general manager of Medscape Education to National Jewish Health, a leading US respiratory hospital, said that an “extensive review” had found that using PMI as a funder was in “full compliance” with standards and that the funder had no input on the planning of the series. The email, seen by *The BMJ*, continued: “Upon reflection, we acknowledge that the use of this funder was a misjudgment that was out of character for Medscape Education and that doing so may have disappointed our members.”

“We have permanently removed the ‘Smoking Cessation’ educational series from Medscape Education’s offerings,” the manager said in the email, adding that the organisation had “established a policy that Medscape Education will not accept funding from any organization affiliated with the tobacco industry.”

Medscape did not reply to multiple efforts by *The BMJ* to reach out for comment and did not confirm the course change. *The BMJ* verified the authenticity of the email and could not find any of the courses on Medscape’s website.

### Call for global ban

Medscape’s backpedalling was welcomed, but critics demanded that tobacco industry funded medical education should not be accredited by the responsible bodies in the first place.

“I am very pleased that Medscape is doing the right thing,” Anthony Gerber, director of pulmonary research at National Jewish Health, told *The BMJ*. But he added that there remained a significant problem with accreditation bodies allowing programmes to be sponsored by tobacco, “and the medical community needs to exert pressure to reverse this policy. If PMI and others really want to help undo the incomprehensible damage they have done and continue to do, there are ways to acceptably donate money—but sponsoring CME with your name attached as a ‘whitewashing’ effort is not one of them.”

*The BMJ* contacted two certification bodies, the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCME) and the American Board of Internal Medicine (ABIM), to ask whether they would consider banning tobacco funded courses that count towards education credits. Medscape is “accredited with commendation” by ACCME. The certification body was conducting a formal inquiry with Medscape, it told *The BMJ*, adding that it could not comment on details or possible considerations of a general ban. ABIM allows ACCME accredited courses to be counted towards its Maintenance of Certification programme, through which physicians need to earn points every five years to remain certified. The organisation deferred responsibility for setting standards to ACCME.

Ling commented, “If the programme was compliant with ACCME standards, then the standards need to be strengthened to ensure they don’t allow merchants of death to educate doctors.”

### Ambitious plans

An internal Medscape document seen by *The BMJ* and *The Examination* hinted at the scope and aim of the programme. The document, titled “Clinical Curriculum for PMI” and “Towards a Smoke-Free Future,” mentioned “A PMI educational destination designed to deliver impact” with “13 total program deliverables to launch from early 2024/mid 2024,” to include over 65 000 “anticipated online learners by end of 2024/mid 2025.”

It added, “The PMI curriculum will deliver impact to the largest community of physicians and HCPs [healthcare professionals] in the US—the Medscape Membership Network.” It gave the cost of the programme as \$2 878 500 (£2.3m; €2.7m) and mentioned a cost per learner of \$44.

“The PMI Curriculum for HCPs comprises of 13 educational activities addressing 6 key topics,” the document said. These activities included “6 foundational curbside consult modules + 6 podcasts,” a “TV-like series featuring a professional host and expert specialists in their real-world practice settings” with six episodes, and an activity called “Medscape clinic + podcast,” featuring “3 clinic simulation vignettes with clinician and patient actors interspersed with 3 expert commentaries on each encounter.” Only five of these activities had apparently been launched.

Ling commented, “While Medscape stated that the funder has had no input in the planning of the series, calling the series ‘The PMI Curriculum’ and ‘A PMI Educational Destination’ in the document implies that the curriculum is PMI’s.”

Robert Jackler, Sewall professor emeritus at the Stanford University School of Medicine, added, “Medscape’s subtitle for the series—‘Towards a Smoke-Free Future’—is a heavily promoted PMI corporate slogan. As there are many accredited CME providers who may be tempted by PMI’s financially generous proposals, accreditation bodies which oversee providers need to join Medscape and send a clear message that the tobacco industry has no business funding CME.

“PMI’s engagement of Medscape was not an isolated occurrence but rather is part of a global campaign.”

### Philip Morris and CME in South Africa

In South Africa, the Alliance of South Africa Independent Practitioners Associations (ASAIPA)—a coalition of health practitioner associations and a medical education provider—has hosted seminars sponsored by Philip Morris South Africa. The course has triggered a complaint from the National Council Against Smoking to the doctors’ regulator, the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), expressing “deep concerns.” The first seminar, in November 2023, was held around the same time as parliamentary hearings were taking place around the country on a bill that would regulate electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS) as tobacco products, the complaint noted. “Accepting funding of CPD from a tobacco company is unethical and stands contrary to . . . the World Health Organisation’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control,” said the HPCSA complaint. The seminar was delivered by an advocate for ENDS, the National Council Against Smoking noted. The speaker, Vivian Manyeki, had not published any peer reviewed research on the topics of harm reduction or tobacco cessation, it said, noting that “she is allied with the African Harm Reduction Alliance which is openly promoting ENDS (electronic nicotine delivery systems) as a public health measure,” citing media appearances.

Shortly after the National Council Against Smoking issued its complaint to HPCSA it noticed the announcement of a second seminar for April 2024, this time with Kgosi Letlape as speaker.<sup>6</sup> Letlape, a past president of HPCSA, is an influential South African ophthalmologist who was also president of the World Medical Association and chair of the South African Medical Association, who also has tobacco industry ties demonstrated by speaking at tobacco industry events. Letlape is also a cofounder of the African Harm Reduction Alliance.

#### “I did not even know who Philip Morris is”

An ASAIPA spokesperson forwarded a general statement saying, “At ASAIPA, our mission is clear: to serve as a tireless advocate for the public good.” ASAIPA’s chair, George Aldrich, responded in an email apparently not meant to be seen by *The BMJ* that, although he “did not attend this CPD to know what was presented,” it was “by a doctor for doctors” and “did not promote or advertise any tobacco products.” Aldrich added, “We did not know the speaker, but our doctors are professional and will not be influenced that easily. Nothing in the invite was related to smoking or vaping and was a totally independent subject. The only issue is the sponsor of this CPD, but I did not even know who Philip Morris is.” HPCSA, Manyeki, and Letlape did not reply to *The BMJ*’s request for comment.

Emerging Market Healthcare, which describes itself as “a provider & patient initiative within the base of 200 Black doctors from disadvantaged areas of the Western Cape,” had already announced similar courses in 2022, which had also prompted a complaint by the National Council Against Smoking to the company.

The complaint said, “We are gravely concerned that the facilitator for the EMC [Emerging Market Healthcare] masterclass course is Prof Praneet Valodia, who serves as a consultant to Philip Morris, South Africa (PMSA), a subsidiary of Philip Morris International (PMI).<sup>7</sup> PMI—which is the largest cigarette manufacturer (and part of the tobacco industry), has a history of funding researchers, medical professionals and setting up front groups in ways meant to intentionally confuse the public and advance their own interests.” The National Council Against Smoking urged Emerging Market Healthcare to reconsider its decision to affiliate or collaborate Valodia and to discontinue the second leg of the masterclass course.

The second course of the series was then cancelled, said Olalekan Ayo-Yusuf, president of the National Council Against Smoking and head of the School of Health Systems and Public Health at University of Pretoria. But apparently PMI quickly found another supplier, he told *The BMJ*. “I was surprised that they’ve become so emboldened,” Ayo-Yusuf said of PMI’s move into medical education. “Tobacco control was so strong in South Africa for many years.”

Leslie London, chair of public health medicine at the University of Cape Town, said, “Industry should be held accountable and should put money into health promotion, but it should be put into an independent foundation which they do not control.”

Valodia replied, “I am an academic and scientist and deliver presentations on independent, evidence based science. I only respond to scientific discussions and am not involved in debates relating to funding by tobacco companies or anything else unrelated to the science and innovation. My only interest is to assist smokers and hence I do not think that it is appropriate for me to respond.”

Emerging Market Healthcare did not reply to *The BMJ*’s request for comment.

### Gulf countries

In Saudi Arabia the educational provider Middle East Medical Portal was providing courses until last year on harm reduction in healthcare and the impact of smoking on public health (1 CME point). The course was advertised as a “CME webinar for healthcare/research professionals in the Gulf Council Countries”<sup>8</sup>—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Qatar.

The website stated, “This educational CME is sponsored by Philip Morris Management Services (Middle East) Limited.” The course consisted of a webinar led by the speaker Tara Rampal, “a consultant anaesthetist and public health expert in the NHS and CEO of Quest Prehabilitation,” the announcement said. An earlier version of the course from 2022 said that it was sponsored by “PMI Science” and featured a prominent PMI logo.<sup>9</sup>

The mention of the course was deleted after *The BMJ* reached out. Nathan Nagel, chief executive of Middle East Medical Portal, told *The BMJ*, “We are a tiny, two person company, and we missed deleting old material that shouldn’t have been on the site. We are overwhelmed with just trying to stay afloat in business. We stopped working with PMI in 2023.”

Tara Rampal did not reply to *The BMJ*’s request for comment.

### Financial disclosures at Medscape

The now withdrawn Medscape series funded by PMI also featured a speaker with financial ties to industry. Brad Rodu, a professor of medicine and holder of a chair endowed by the US Smokeless Tobacco Company and Swedish Match North America (now owned by PMI), was presented on Medscape’s site as having “no relevant financial relationships.” When questioned by *The BMJ*, Medscape at first said that according to the ACCME standards it didn’t need to disclose financial relationships if they didn’t concern a healthcare company or were older than two years.<sup>1</sup> However, *The BMJ* has found that in addition to the endowed professorship, Rodu acted as a speaker at the industry’s Global Tobacco

and Nicotine Forum in 2022, within the two year window mentioned by Medscape.<sup>10</sup>

Rodu replied that he wasn’t paid for his presentation at the 2022 forum. He said, “For the past 30 years my policy has been to present my work to any interested audience. If I am invited to participate and/or make a presentation at a meeting, I ask for reimbursement for travel expenses in order to preserve scarce university resources.”

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