



October 20, 2020

Dear Dr. Vallone and Colleagues,

Thank you for your letter to Dr. Alfredo Morabia, dated September 21, 2020, and for sharing your concerns regarding the recent forum published in *AJPH*. We have discussed the inclusion of articles written by authors funded by the tobacco industry in the forum on e-cigarettes of the June 2020 issue of *AJPH*.

Both pieces had the following conflicts of interest disclosures (COIs):

"The Foundation for a Smoke-Free World has received contributions from Philip Morris International (PMI) in 2018 and 2019, each in the amount of US \$80 million. PMI has pledged to contribute \$80 million annually for the next 10 years. Under the Foundation's bylaws and pledge agreement, PMI and the tobacco industry generally are precluded from having any control of or influence over how the foundation spends its funds or focuses its activities"

"B. Rodu's research is supported by unrestricted grants from tobacco manufacturers to the University of Louisville and by the Kentucky Research Challenge Trust Fund."

The COIs were mentioned twice, once in the Comments themselves, and once in a special page: <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdfplus/10.2105/AJPH.2020.110.6.771>

To be clear, these opinion pieces were not "tobacco industry-funded research." The PDF of these Comments clearly state that they are editorial matters. Had they been peer reviewed, the footer in each article would have read "peer reviewed" along the outside edge of the page. Unfortunately, several of the articles were mislabeled by the website. We have tracked down the offending code and will be correcting the problem, as well as issuing an erratum for all of the affected pieces to correct the publication record.

We agree that the tobacco industry famously uses all possible means to subvert the scientific discussion in its favor. This has been proven time and again, including, as you mention it, in *AJPH*, and is indisputable. We respectfully disagree, however, that the full range of viewpoints



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should not have been expressed in the forum. Dr. Morabia personally supervised the preparation and construction of the forum, and he invited the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World and Brad Rodu to have a more complete view of the debate since, because of their ties to the industry, they would provide the industry's perspective on the lead article of the section summarizing an FDA's "guidance to the industry". Overall, we invited twelve 600-word comments on the guidelines emitted by the FDA entitled "Enforcement Priorities for Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS) and Other Deemed Products on the Market Without Premarket Authorization. Guidance for Industry." Among the invited were scientists and lawyers disclosing ties with the industry and clearly acknowledging twice their potential conflicts of interest—once in the Comments and once on a special page at the beginning of the forum—to ensure full transparency. We understand that your primary concern is the perception that this provides the industry a vehicle for promoting and manipulating the science—they have a long history of deploying this tactic to attempt to legitimize their products. However, we did not ask the industry's opinion on the science, but on what they expected the impact of the FDA guidance would have on vaping and smoking rates. Indeed, seeing both the pro-vaping and the anti-vaping groups criticizing the FDA's guidance was extremely informative about the logic underlying the FDA's strategy. Providing a forum for open scientific debate (with transparency on conflicts of interest) for the full range of views is important especially in these times of distrust and politization of science.

AJPH has been regularly covering the public health aspects of e-cigarettes, including trends of consumption, history, and key discussions on the role of e-cig in tobacco smoking cessation. Public health is a broad field, with many dimensions and stakeholders, both public and private. We do indeed have to carefully find ways to allow for the full debate on controversial issues. We realize that the tobacco industry is untrustworthy and tobacco and its derivatives (Nicotine) endanger human health, and we are committed to ensuring a place to debate the best science without inappropriate influence.

We hear your points about the visibility of the COI statements and the fact that the industry has an advantage on buying the Open Access compared to researchers or public health practitioners and will examine carefully what we can change in our procedures.



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We appreciate your effort to share with us your concerns and your dedication to the health of the public.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Georges C. Benjamin".

Georges C. Benjamin, MD
Executive Director
American Public Health
Association

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alfredo Morabia".

Alfredo Morabia, MD
Editor-in-Chief
*American Journal of
Public Health*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gopal Sankaran".

Gopal Sankaran, MD, DrPH
Editorial Board Chair
*American Journal of
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