

Urgent message to APHA Executive Board and *AJPH* Editorial Board

January 6, 2021

Dear members of the APHA Executive Board and *AJPH* Editorial Board

Subject: An Ill-Considered Partnership between the *American Journal of Public Health* and the Tobacco Industry Threatens the Scientific Credibility of the Journal and the Integrity of APHA

In June 2020, the editors of *The American Journal of Public Health* published a series of articles discussing which public health controls should be adopted for e-cigarettes.¹ One of the participants in this discussion was Dr. Derek Yach, President of the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, who argued – despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary - that e-cigarettes are beneficial, that flavors should not be regulated, that regulations would simply increase the black market, and that “many tobacco control non-governmental organization activists” create public misconception and alarmism.²

We are writing this letter to express the view that the editors of *The American Journal of Public Health* made a very serious error of judgement in allowing Dr. Yach and the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World to publish their views in the journal. By giving Dr. Yach space in the official journal of the American Public Health Association, the editors have assisted the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World in its ongoing efforts to convey the impression that Dr. Yach’s opinions represent a legitimate scientific difference of opinion - when in fact Dr. Yach’s expressed views are anything but honest or legitimate.

The Foundation for a Smoke-Free World and Dr. Yach are not objective scientists weighing the pro and cons of e-cigarettes from the perspective of protecting the public’s health. Instead, they are well-known, well-funded fronts for the tobacco industry. The main supporter of the Foundation is Philip Morris International (PMI), the world’s largest publicly traded tobacco company. PMI is financing the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World with \$80 million annually over the next 12 years - a total of nearly \$1 billion.^{3, 4}

To undo the damage done to the journal’s scientific credibility and the APHA’s integrity that has resulted from the *AJPH* editors’ ill-considered actions, we believe that *the American Journal of Public Health* and APHA need to take deliberate corrective action.

You, the members of the APHA Executive Board and *AJPH* Editorial Board need to recognize that the publication of Dr. Yach’s article (and of several additional articles by tobacco industry scientists in the same issue of *AJPH*) is – like it or not - an egregious example of *de facto* policy-making on the ground. These are policy-related actions that have been undertaken in violation of APHA’s well established and time-tested, and highly consultative procedures for setting the Association’s policies. They are major policy positions that were taken with no open

discussion.

Please allow us to offer five backgrounders on Dr. Yach and the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World and then suggest remedies.

Backgrounder #1. The World Health Organization has specifically condemned the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World and refuses to engage with it in any way. WHO states:

“When it comes to the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, there are a number of clear conflicts of interest involved with a tobacco company funding a purported health foundation, particularly if it promotes sale of tobacco and other products found in that company’s brand portfolio.”⁵

WHO has banned the Foundation and Dr. Yach from participating in its meetings.⁶ It notes that collaboration with the Foundation by a government that is a Party to the WHO Convention on Tobacco Control constitutes a clear violation of Article 5.3 of the Convention.⁷ WHO specifically states that the public health community should not partner with the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World.⁸

Backgrounder #2. The World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA), of which APHA is a member, issued the following statement in December 2020:

“We are pleased that the vast majority of public health organizations worldwide rejects and disapproves any sort of collaboration with the tobacco industry. Today, the WFPHA reiterates its call on all public health associations to advocate and adopt policies that prevent any collaboration with the tobacco industry or tobacco industry front groups.”⁹

Backgrounder #3. The Union for International Cancer Control, the International Network for Epidemiology in Policy, the World Heart Federation, and the American Cancer Society have all called on public health associations to reject collaboration with or funding from the tobacco industry or its front organizations, specifically naming the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World.¹⁰⁻¹⁵

Backgrounder #4. Dozens of public health professionals around the world [wrote](#) to the *AJPH* pointing out why the editors’ decision to collaborate with the tobacco industry was wrong and asking that they reverse this policy. In response, APHA’s Executive Director, the *AJPH* Editor-in Chief and the *AJPH* Editorial Board Chair sent a [letter](#) rejecting this request and justifying the journal’s policy of collaboration with the tobacco industry and its front groups.

Backgrounder #5. Representatives of the APHA Epidemiology Section, the International Network for Epidemiology in Policy, and we the undersigned have made multiple

submissions to the *AJPH* and the APHA over the past 6 months opposing the journal's *de facto* policy of collaboration with the tobacco industry. The *AJPH* editors have refused to respond substantively to the questions we and others have raised or to publish any of these submissions.

Our Proposed Remedy. The time has come for you, the members of the APHA Executive Board and the *AJPH* Editorial Board to openly discuss the issue of the journal's collaboration with the tobacco industry.

This is a serious issue. It will not go away. It can no longer be papered over or dismissed with the comment that this collaboration was somehow "different" or just a one-off thing. We strongly suspect that - even as we speak - representatives of the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World are gleefully presenting copies of Dr. Yach's *AJPH* article to Ministries of Health in low-income and middle-income countries around the world and using his printed words in a prestigious journal to argue the safety of e-cigarettes. The Foundation is almost certainly using your good name and your credibility to propagate the tobacco pandemic.

We therefore ask you, the members of the APHA Executive Board and the *AJPH* Editorial Board to take the following two actions:

- Adopt a formal APHA policy position joining the World Health Organization, the World Federation of Public Health Associations and leading, respected public health organizations across the United States and around the world in their rejection of any collaboration with or funding from the tobacco industry or its front groups.
- Direct the editors of *AJPH* to issue a printed statement in the journal and to list this statement in Pub Med retracting the articles it published by Dr. Derek Yach and other individuals and organizations funded by the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World and other arms of the tobacco industry in its June 2020 issue.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

- Philip J. Landrigan, MD, MSc, Professor and Director, Program for Global Public Health and the Common Good, Schiller Institute for Integrated Science and Society, Boston College. Former Chair, APHA Section on Occupational Health.
- Richard A. Lemen, PhD, Assistant Surgeon General, United States Public Health Service (Retired); Adjunct Professor, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.
- Kathleen Ruff, Recipient, Canadian Public Health Association National Public Health Hero Award; Honorary Fellow, Collegium Ramazzini.

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