

Review of "The Foundation for a Smoke-Free World after two years: can it be trusted?"

Foundation for a Smoke-Free World¹

¹ Foundation for A Smoke-Free World

The Foundation for a Smoke-Free World (FSFW) welcomes Professor Jean-Francois Etter's article and commends his high degree of professionalism. We strongly agree with his assessment of the harassment of scientists who work with the Foundation. Across the sciences, this type of hostility is far too common and can undermine valuable research.¹ Erika Marín-Spiotta, writing in *Nature*, appropriately classified this type of harassment as a form of scientific misconduct.² We endorse the policy released by the Wellcome Trust, which deems "bullying and harassment of any kind, in any context, to be unacceptable."³

Our grantees have experienced bullying on multiple occasions, both in person and online. These researchers are working diligently to reduce death and disease caused by smoking. These assaults harm more than the reputations of scientists. They can, potentially, suppress vital research and influence policy in ways that undermine public health.⁴

Etter's article does not accurately reflect FSFW's independence from our funder Philip Morris International (PMI). In establishing FSFW as a 501(c)(3) organization, we closely adhered to criteria laid forth by Cohen et al to be considered when accepting funding from tobacco companies.⁵ We are transparent regarding our funder PMI, which is prohibited from influencing our use of funds. Additionally, we own our data; we have complete freedom regarding what and where we publish; we have established an independent research agenda; and we have an independent Board of Directors (leaders in their fields who have no association with tobacco companies).

There is an urgent need for more research into cessation and harm reduction, and FSFW is working to fill these gaps. The source of our funding should not negate this good work. Writing in 2018, John R. Hughes and colleagues adeptly summarized this point, noting:

“Given that 7 million smokers die each year due to the use of combustible tobacco products (www.who.int), there is an under-appreciated urgency to decrease this toll and that all approaches should be considered.”⁶

Finally, we would like to address Etter’s comments that the Foundation does not work with high-caliber scientists and researchers. He writes, for example: “It is evident that the FSFW has difficulty attracting experienced tobacco control researchers” and, “[the] Foundation has difficulty attracting renowned scientists.” FSFW’s grantees include highly experienced smoking cessation and harm reduction experts from around the world. We also seek researchers from outside the narrow confines of tobacco control—because we know that transformational progress requires collaborating with a diverse set of contributors. The Foundation thus aims to maintain a healthy balance of researchers with expertise in tobacco control and in other disciplines.

Our grantees are globally recognized in their fields. For example, three who are leading FSFW’s Centers of Excellence (COE) include:

1. Marewa Glover, PhD, an indigenous behavioral scientist who has worked on reducing the health burden from smoking for over 25 years. She leads the Centre of Research Excellence: Indigenous Sovereignty & Smoking in New Zealand, building indigenous peoples’ capacity to reduce the harms from tobacco smoking.
2. Jed Rose, PhD, co-inventor of the nicotine patch in the 1980s and the Director of the Duke Center for Smoking Cessation. He specializes in the discovery of novel compounds and innovative treatments to improve cessation.
3. Riccardo Polosa, MD, PhD, a harm reduction expert who is the director of CoEHAR, the Center of Excellence for the Acceleration of Harm Reduction at the University of Catania. The CoEHAR’s multidisciplinary research program encompasses developed and developing countries and examines all aspects of tobacco harm reduction, from chemical characterization of products to conducting essential multi-year cohort studies.

Further, our staff includes experts who have worked within the FDA, Bloomberg Philanthropies, and WHO tobacco control programs. Yet, we differ from such organizations in that we believe that all fields stagnate without new ideas and new intellectual leadership. These initiatives are necessary to reinvigorate the field of tobacco control at a time of profound changes in the science of cessation, harm reduction, biomarker development, behavioral economics, communications science, and more. Harnessing these innovations, we will accelerate the work to end smoking in this generation.

References

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