

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:24:23

Louis

Welcome to Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco, a weekly podcast from the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath. We are an international and award-winning group that investigates the tactics used by Big Tobacco to maximise its profits at the expense of public health. The evidence we produce helps society to hold this deadly industry to account.

00:00:24:24 – 00:00:54:00

Various speakers

The health issues are massive. Globally each year, tobacco kills 9 million people. That's the equivalent of wiping out the population of London each year. Corporations are out for profit. Anything that is going to harm those profits is going to be unpalatable to them. This is a massive issue globally because if you look at global deaths just four corporate products cause between a third and two thirds of all global deaths.

00:00:54:01 - 00:01:03:16

Louis

If you enjoy listening then please subscribe and share this podcast.

00:01:04:24 - 00:02:04:11

Welcome to the first episode of the series, where we'll be setting the scene asking, how do you take on a powerful industry like Big Tobacco? My name is Louis Laurence and I'm going to be your host for this first season of the podcast, where I'll be joined by experts to explore tobacco industry tactics in pursuit of profit over health.

Tobacco kills at least half of long-term smokers, accounting for more deaths each year than HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined. But unlike these infectious diseases, the main vector for tobacco deaths is the tobacco industry itself. The tobacco industry has spent decades honing its deadly strategies to maximise its profits, and today these strategies provide inspiration for other sectors such as gambling, fossil fuels, and ultra processed foods who make vast sums of money at the expense of our and the planet's health.

As well as looking at tobacco company tactics, we will also dig into the solutions and the ways in which we can effectively and safely challenge powerful industries.

00:02:04:13 - 00:02:16:16

But first, we need to lay the foundations. And to help me do that, I'm joined by Anna Gilmore, professor of public health and director of the Tobacco Control Research Group here at the University of Bath. Welcome, Anna.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:02:16:18 - 00:02:18:17

Anna

Thank you.

00:02:18:19 - 00:02:22:05

Louis

Let's start by defining the tobacco industry.

00:02:22:07 - 00:02:47:12

Anna

Okay. So there is actually a formal definition of the tobacco industry, which is the, tobacco manufacturers, wholesalers and importers of tobacco products. But that really is a bit too simplistic because the tobacco industry is actually much more complex than that, because nowadays tobacco companies don't just sell tobacco. They sell a whole host of other addictive products.

00:02:47:12 - 00:03:15:20

So e-cigarettes, oral tobacco, oral nicotine, some now even sell cannabis. And then they've added to their remit, some of them have at least some pharmaceutical products. So they're now a bit more messy, as an industry. But then there are plenty of other organisations and individuals that that work for or represent tobacco companies. So trade associations like the Tobacco Manufacturers Association or industry lobbyists.

00:03:15:20 - 00:03:40:07

And then there's a whole lot of public relations and advertising agencies that work with and for tobacco companies. And then on top of that, the tobacco industry increasingly actually tries to use third parties and front groups to represent itself. So it works through think tanks like the Institute of Economic Affairs, for example. Or it has scientific front groups that it's set up.

00:03:40:07 - 00:04:01:21

So, you know, we had, Philip Morris putting \$1 million into the Foundation for Smoke Free World, which was "outed", if you like, and is now more or less reformed as another organisation. And so one of the key issues that we face in, in policymaking in particular, is you sometimes just don't know who's who. You know, who is the tobacco industry?

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:04:01:21 - 00:04:14:04

Is this organisation or this individual in front of me representing the tobacco industry and increasingly we refer to that as a sort of dark influence web, because they fund one organisation which funds another organisation, which funds

00:04:14:04 - 00:04:19:21

another. And so it can be really difficult to know exactly who the tobacco industry is.

00:04:19:23 - 00:04:27:04

Louis

So we've defined the industry. What are some of the companies that make up the tobacco industry?

00:04:27:06 - 00:04:46:19

Anna

So there are four big transnational tobacco companies that operate globally Philip Morris International, British American Tobacco, Japan Tobacco and Imperial Brands. And then the other big player, which is not a transnational, is the Chinese National Tobacco Company. So those are the biggest companies. And then there are a few smaller ones, but those are the big players.

00:04:46:21 - 00:04:56:14

Louis

Maybe an obvious question in some ways, but this influence that the industry controls, why is that such a problem for public health in particular?

00:04:56:16 - 00:05:23:09

Anna

Well, let's look at this. You know, the tobacco companies cause huge harm. Governments need to regulate to address that harm. And in fact over 180 governments around the world have signed up to this legally binding treaty, the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. So they've agreed to implement these policies, but many of them are struggling to do so because the tobacco industry opposes those policies.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:05:23:11 - 00:05:32:10

And it's not always doing that directly. Sometimes it's doing that through those third parties and other organisations that I'm talking about, and that that can be confusing.

00:05:32:22 - 00:05:37:10

Louis

You mentioned the Framework Convention. Could you just give us a quick explainer of what that is?

00:05:37:12 - 00:05:46:04

Anna

Okay. So this is a legally binding global treaty that was developed under the auspices of the World Health Organization.

00:05:46:08 - 00:05:58:19

And through that, it basically sets out a whole host of policies that governments have agreed to implement to try and reduce tobacco use and address the global tobacco epidemic.

00:05:58:21 - 00:06:08:03

Louis

So you mentioned the health harms of tobacco. Is this just a health issue, or are there other wider societal issues caused by the tobacco industry?

00:06:08:05 - 00:06:36:23

Anna

Well, the health issues are massive. You know, globally, each year tobacco kills 9 million people. That's the equivalent of wiping out the population of London each year. And just to put that in context, Covid over four years killed 6.9 million. The single largest number killed in the year was 2 million. And yet look at the massive global response that was to Covid.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:06:37:00 - 00:06:54:13

And each year we have 9 million. The population of London being wiped out. And really not enough is happening. So it is a massive health issue. It's also an economic issue because that's hugely detrimental to economies. You're losing people of working age. You know,

00:06:54:13 - 00:06:55:20

it's a societal issue.

00:06:55:20 - 00:07:00:06

Think of the harm that causes. Think of the way they're marketing to children.

00:07:00:08 - 00:07:11:10

And nowadays they're not only marketing cigarettes, but they're marketing a whole host of other addictive products. And some of the evidence that I think is really worrying is evidence suggesting that

00:07:11:10 - 00:07:26:10

nicotine use at a young age. (And remember, we've got really young kids using e-cigarettes, which have high levels of nicotine, some of them.) That nicotine on the young brain can effectively rewire the brain to increase the risk of addiction in the long term.

00:07:26:12 - 00:07:40:08

So this can be a massive societal issue. And as we've touched on, it's a political issue because we need political action to address it. And yet the industry is a sort of skilled political operator, if you like. So

00:07:40:08 - 00:07:41:21

it really is a,

00:07:41:21 - 00:07:45:02

a massive societal issue that needs to be addressed from all fronts.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:07:45:06 - 00:07:51:11

Louis

Why do you think there's less response to tobacco than something like Covid or infectious diseases?

00:07:51:13 - 00:08:09:13

Anna

Well, Margaret Chan, who was director of the World Health Organization, some years ago, when the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control came and summed it up, she said, mosquitoes have no lobbyists, you know, so that kind of explains why it's so much easier to move forward in infectious diseases than it is

00:08:09:13 - 00:08:13:19

in diseases that are caused by corporations.

00:08:13:21 - 00:08:41:11

And this is a massive issue globally, because if you look at global deaths just for corporate products, cause between a third and two thirds of all global deaths, that's massive. So that's tobacco, fossil fuels, ultra processed food and alcohol. And that's just sort of touching the surface, if you like. There's a whole other load of commercial products that are harmful.

00:08:41:13 - 00:09:05:07

And of course, commercial actors, regardless of their product, can also harm health through their practices and the continuous effort to drive down costs as a way of maximising profit. So, for example, you know, we see shortcuts in supply chains that lead to chemical spillages and polluting waterways. We see, you know, this shift in labour practices towards zero hours and informal, working contracts that have damaged health.

00:09:05:09 - 00:09:09:06

So it's a massive public health issue.

00:09:09:08 - 00:09:23:04

Louis

I think you've really clearly defined the problem there. You're director of the Tobacco Control Research Group here at the University of Bath. What's the role of this group in combating the tobacco industry and of a powerful industries?

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:09:23:06 - 00:09:44:11

Anna

Well, I set up the Tobacco Control Research Group a long time ago now, back in 2008. So I came to this university in 2007 and what we've always had a particular focus on is industry and the way that corporations, if you like, the way that the commercial sector drives ill health. And initially we focussed on the tobacco industry.

00:09:44:11 - 00:10:04:18

So we did other work in public health, but we took this perspective that a key issue and a key driver of ill health is the industry. And you're only really going to be able to tackle these problems if you understand and also tackle the industry. And over time, that focus has evolved to look at other industries.

00:10:04:18 - 00:10:27:02

So we also look at, you know, alcohol companies, food industry and so on. And now we really look at the whole system, what we now call the Commercial Determinants of Health. For example, you know, we've developed a model to look at how the tobacco industry influences, policy. And then we looked at we apply that to the alcohol industry.

00:10:27:02 - 00:10:56:12

They were doing the same thing and others applied it to other industries. And so now we've developed a sort of a model and taxonomy of corporate policy influence that can be applied across the board. And we've done the same in science. So we all know the tobacco industry has an appalling history of manipulating science. And so we then have now looked at the far broader history of corporate manipulation of science in general to show that actually diverse industries are all influencing science in the same way.

00:10:56:14 - 00:11:17:18

And the important thing is we can kind of tell you now exactly how they're doing those things, which means we can take actions to address it. So that's the sort of, that's the bread and butter work, if you like, is taking that, industry focus. But we do other things. So we, for example, evaluate the impacts of policy change and public health interventions on health.

00:11:17:20 - 00:11:34:05

And we also develop evidence for policy. And some of that evidence for policy also comes from studying industry, because once you understand what industry is doing, including how it's, for example, circumventing policies, that also helps provide evidence for policy.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:11:34:05 - 00:11:43:06

Louis

So how does the work that happens here at the Tobacco Control Research Group get translated into to policy change?

00:11:43:08 - 00:12:08:01

Anna

That's a really good question. So we are committed to using our work for public good. And I refer to our work as being embedded. And that's because I think it's not just about doing your work and then trying to use your work to influence policy. You've got to do the right work in the first place. And to do that, I think you need to be embedded in the communities where that work is being used.

00:12:08:01 - 00:12:27:10

So that might be in the tobacco control community, you know, because you've really got to understand what are the issues being faced by policy makers, by advocates. And so then that means if you if you are embedded in those communities, you're doing the right work. And then your work can then be used as soon as it's ready to influence policy.

00:12:27:12 - 00:12:54:15

And, you know, I also say nothing is ever achieved in isolation. You know, we can't just sit has researchers and expect a sort of magic wand to wave and use our work. So, we work really closely with advocates in this country, at the EU level, at the global level, in other countries. We work closely with policymakers, again, in this country and abroad and with other colleagues.

00:12:54:15 - 00:13:14:15

That's, you know, the other way our work is used is, you know, others then apply our models or our work can inform other people's work. So we've had work, for example, on how the tobacco industry prices its products. And we did that work because we spotted the tobacco industry was up to something suspicious. And that work has now been replicated in other countries.

00:13:14:15 - 00:13:15:09

So

00:13:15:09 - 00:13:27:03

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

I think the simplest way is to talk about that embeddedness so that you, you know, you're linked in, you're talking the same language, you're doing the relevant work. And you can then use it to, to get it to the right people.

00:13:27:18 - 00:13:35:12

Louis

You mentioned this model on how the industry influences policy. Could you tell us a bit more about what that model is?

00:13:35:14 - 00:14:01:15

Anna

Yes. So we started this work looking at tobacco companies because, remember, the tobacco companies were sued and they had to make their documents public. And those provided an amazing resource for really understanding, not just what the tobacco companies were doing, but why they were doing it. Because it was, you know, laid bare in these documents. And there was so much, so many papers, you know, looking at how they influence policy that when people used to say to me, so Anna how do they influence policy?

00:14:01:15 - 00:14:26:07

And I might just have the latest paper in my mind, and I kind of first know we need to condense this. So we did a systematic review of how they influence marketing policy and a systematic review of how they influence tax policy. And then we pulled those together in this taxonomy and model, and we divided what they do into arguments (the “discursive strategies”) and then their sort of “action strategies”.

00:14:26:09 - 00:14:38:06

The arguments are always similar. And basically their primary argument is whatever you're doing is going to be disastrous, it will lead to this dystopian future. And then that's expanded in all sorts of different ways. But then it's the...

00:14:38:06 - 00:14:39:11

Louis

That's the argument from the industry?

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:14:39:12 - 00:15:05:12

Anna

That's the argument from the industry against the policy. You know, whatever you do, it's going to be disastrous. And they will just paint this dystopian future. So we did call our initial model The Policy Dystopia Model. And then they propagate those misleading arguments in four key ways. The first, and the easiest for them, is just to be directly involved in policy making.

00:15:05:12 - 00:15:30:09

So their ideal is to be, you know, on the committee shaping policy, working with ministers, and historically in this country, that's exactly what the tobacco industry would do. And so, for example, it led to the most appalling policy. So that there were voluntary codes, it was all voluntary approaches, they don't work. And there was one, for example, instead of sort of having health warning labels that were mandatory.

00:15:30:09 - 00:15:50:08

They had health hints on packs, like, for example, don't smoke, you know, don't smoke it right down to the butt, it feels laughable now. But, millions died as a result of this sort of behaviour. And we're seeing exactly that now in these other industries. So if we look at ultra processed food, the industry is around the table making policy.

00:15:50:10 - 00:16:21:20

It's all about voluntary approaches, partnerships. They don't work. Where there's a conflict of interest between the industry and public health, those voluntary approaches and partnership approaches just don't work. So that's direct involvement. And then they move from that to other strategies. So coalition management is one. Reputation management is another. And information management is the third. So if I talk you through on each of those, they both they built their own coalition and then they attack our coalition.

00:16:21:20 - 00:16:49:10

They build their own reputation, they attack public health reputation and so on. And so coalition management is about building a whole coalition of organisations that will fight your cause. And so this is bringing, you know, paying think tanks, setting up front groups, you know, so they've in the past, for example, funded ex-policemen, who've never worked on tobacco smuggling, but will basically propagate the tobacco industry's arguments on tobacco smuggling.

00:16:49:16 - 00:17:18:15

So it's building a whole host of organisations that will lobby for you. And what that achieves is it gives this really misleading impression that there's a whole diverse group of organisations and individuals

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

that oppose the policy. So if I tell you about when we looked at plain packaging for cigarettes in this country, we came across, I think, about 120 organisations that were opposing the policy, and we could link almost every single one of those to the tobacco industry.

00:17:18:17 - 00:17:37:10

But for politicians, they just think there's so many organisations that are opposed to this policy from different walks of life. But really these are puppets manipulated by the tobacco industry. And then what they try and do is fragment. So that's building their coalition. Then they try and attack us to try and break down public health groups.

00:17:37:10 - 00:17:56:16

And this is what they've been really trying to do over the debates over e-cigarettes, trying to get the public health community to fight each other. And then you've got what we call reputation management. So this is activities like corporate social responsibility. And they use that to build their own reputation and try and convince governments that they're the good guys.

00:17:56:18 - 00:18:19:00

So in this country, the tobacco industry lost its credibility. And now it's continuously trying to regain its credibility. But in some countries, particularly in countries where they farm tobacco, the tobacco industry is really still seen as a normal operator. And so there they're just trying to maintain that credibility. So the way that works varies. And then they attack, they try and attack our credibility.

00:18:19:00 - 00:18:39:15

And one of the things the tobacco industry is doing now, now that it's selling all these other products that are not just cigarettes, it's using that to claim it's changed. And that it now is the solution to public health and that we are misinformed. You don't need these public health people anymore because, you know, we've got the answers, get rid of them.

00:18:39:17 - 00:19:05:01

Anna

And then you've got this information management and this is how they use science. So here what they do is they create a whole evidence base that supports their case and has been shown to be highly misleading. So we know that for decades they hid the harms of smoking and of second hand smoke. And now what they do is they create confusion about the policies that we need to reduce tobacco use.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:19:05:03 - 00:19:30:18

And then at the same time, they attack the public health evidence. And that kind of sounds straightforward. But what you've got to imagine is you've got these companies with vast resources that they will just throw anything into that. So if we go back to the plain pack story, you know, I mentioned about 120 of these third parties, but it was like every day you would open the newspaper and there would be another organisation.

00:19:30:19 - 00:19:34:07

You'd go, "looks like another front group", but you'd have to investigate each one.

00:19:34:07 - 00:19:37:16

Louis

And how did you do that? How do you know that it's linked to the industry?

00:19:37:16 - 00:19:55:15

Anna

Well you learn to kind of smell a rat is what I say. So you know, there's an organisation you haven't heard of before. It's fighting the industry fight. It's using the industry's wording. And then you just got to dig into the data and look how is it financed? Who's working there? What are the links. And we sort of have a protocol if you like that we would work through.

00:19:55:17 – 00:19:59:14

Louis

So these are some highly evolved strategies from this industry.

00:19:59:14 – 00:20:20:02

Anna

So those are the main ways the tobacco industry fights a specific policy that's on the table. But of course, it also uses those methods to try and prevent the policy even getting onto the table. And the more direct access it gets to government, the more governments are misled. And that's why policies very often, you know, historically didn't get on the table.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:20:20:02 - 00:20:41:19

And that's why now for food and so on policies are not getting on the table because governments get hoodwinked. But then there are two other strategies they use. And those are illicit trade and litigation. So it sounds counterintuitive, but there is overwhelming evidence that the tobacco industry has engaged in the smuggling of its cigarettes on a global scale.

00:20:41:19 - 00:21:07:03

And there are endless tobacco industry documents that make this quite clear. You know, for example, I was doing work on the former Soviet Union, and you would see that in the majority, after the Soviet Union collapsed, it was getting its cigarettes into those markets almost entirely through tobacco smuggling and then questioning, "Oh, do we even need to bother moving to the legal channels because we're doing so well through these illegal channels?"

00:21:07:05 - 00:21:26:12

There's a number of advantages to tobacco companies through cigarette smuggling. First of all, cigarettes are highly taxed. And if you get cigarettes into countries and they're not taxed, they're available much cheaper. The cheaper they are, the more they sell. They also use it to undermine policy. So they would go to governments and say, "Oh, you've got a huge problem with cigarette smuggling.

00:21:26:14 - 00:21:49:12

The reason is your taxes are too high. You need to reduce your taxes." They wouldn't say we're actually orchestrating the smuggling of these products, you know. And actually we've got it under control. And so they use it to undermine policies as well. There are other advantages for them and what they do then is because there are then illicit cigarettes on the market, that's one of their favourite arguments against any policy.

00:21:49:12 - 00:22:12:10

"Oh well if you put taxes up, illicit trade is going to go up. If you put cigarettes in plain packs, illicit trade is going to go up." But you know, in the background they're able to manipulate those rates of illicit trade. So that's one issue. And litigation kind of works in a similar way. They will always argue that the policy will be illegal and, you know, or anti-constitutional whatever they come up with.

00:22:12:12 - 00:22:32:06

And sometimes, you know, I've seen documents where they've commissioned legal opinions that tell them the policy would be legal, but they will still claim that, that it won't be legal. And then they will also take legal action against the policy, even when they know the policy is legally sound. And that has a sort of a chilling effect, if you like.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:22:32:06 - 00:23:00:22

So you know, they will... plain packaging again, you know, it was brought in first in Australia. The industry will sue the Australian government to try and exert a chilling effect on any other country trying to implement that policy. And in high income countries, governments have got the resources to fight back in the litigation. But for low and middle income countries, the threat of litigation is really scary because it can cost so much to defend against that litigation.

00:23:00:24 - 00:23:20:17

And this is just an appalling thing really, because you've got, I see this in the FCTC, you've got these countries, there was so much enthusiasm early on in the negotiations for the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, countries signing up to this treaty. This was going to really help them address tobacco use.

00:23:20:19 - 00:23:26:14

And then some of them get mired in this battle with the tobacco industry. They use their vast resources to really hold those governments back.

00:23:31:17 - 00:23:37:23

Louis

So has the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control been effective at challenging some of these broad strategies that you mentioned?

00:23:37:23 - 00:24:01:18

Anna

Yes, I mean, the evidence is clear that the FCTC has absolutely advanced tobacco control policies. It's not plain sailing for the reasons we've kind of touched on, but there is no doubt that it has been a major contributor to advancing tobacco control globally. And one of the key reasons is there's, I would say almost the most important article in that treaty, is what we call Article 5.3.

00:24:01:20 - 00:24:30:06

And that article is about protecting policy making from the tobacco industry. And so the Framework Convention recognises that there is a huge conflict between the interests of the tobacco industry on one hand and the interests of public health on the other. And for that reason governments must protect their policies from the tobacco industry. And then there are guidelines that were developed a bit later that set out exactly how countries can achieve that.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:24:30:08 - 00:24:31:05

And

00:24:31:05 - 00:24:33:11

that is arguably one of the

00:24:33:11 - 00:25:02:14

biggest reasons for progress in reducing tobacco use. And if we look across these other areas that we've touched on, like alcohol or ultra processed food or fossil fuels, they all need the equivalent of an Article 5.3, because governments need to recognise that these corporate interests are conflicted with the public interest because they have one primary remit, which is to maximise profits, and any government policy that could reduce their profits or reduce their sales.

00:25:02:16 - 00:25:26:16

You know, clean air zones, the fossil fuel industry is conflicted. They should not be at the policy table. Say it's a fast-food advertising ban. The ultra processed food industry should not be at the policy table, they're conflicted. And the sooner we move to protect policies from those very obvious conflicts of interest, the quicker we'll be able to advance in public health and address these commercial health harms.

00:25:26:16 - 00:25:34:22

Louis

Do you think there's much appetite globally or even here in the UK, to have a similar kind of regulation of these other industries?

00:25:34:24 - 00:25:51:07

Anna

It depends what you mean. I think in terms of basic regulation, yes, they need to be regulated in the same way, both in terms of having a conflict of interest policy. If we want to call for Article 5.3 or an approach to governance, if we want to call it that. So I think there is absolutely an appetite for that.

00:25:51:07 - 00:26:09:01

You know, I've been asked to go and speak on that issue in a number of places, for example, in the European Parliament, to talk about fossil fuel and why we need an article 5.3 for fossil fuels. But also in terms of the basic regulations that we need to do to address these health harming industries.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:26:09:03 - 00:26:34:12

And it's not rocket science. You've got, you know, we talk about the four As - affordability, accessibility, availability and attractiveness. And, you know, tobacco control policies basically reduced the affordability, availability, accessibility and so on for tobacco. We need to do the same for alcohol, for ultra processed food, for gambling, and so on. And then I guess your question could also imply, do we need a global treaty for all of these other things?

00:26:34:14 - 00:27:05:08

And there have been proposals around that, you know, we need a treaty for alcohol. Personally, I think you don't want to get into having a treaty for all of those things. But I think what you could try and develop is, the equivalent of an Article 5.3 or a global treaty on governance and how you should approach that for all these industries, because I think that is a key underpinning problem that we need to address across the board.

00:27:05:10 - 00:27:25:06

One of the reasons I think we shouldn't go down having a treaty for all these industries is it takes so long to get there. But the process can also be really useful because it starts changing norms. It gets people to recognise that these, you know, the scale of the harm, that these industries are not normal actors.

00:27:25:08 - 00:27:45:20

And so I think if you can focus that on one initiative that would address all those industries, that would probably be the best way forward. And really, it's not rocket science is about good governance, really. It's just basic good governance. And every government should be implementing this anyway. But if that helps take it forward, then we need to do that.

00:27:45:22 - 00:28:08:23

And I think one of the problems that's happened is in areas other than tobacco is this idea that somehow tobacco is exceptional. So the product may be exceptional, because it kills two in three of its users and that's vast. But actually, we are starting to understand that some of these other products are also incredibly harmful and certainly the scale of their harm,

00:28:08:23 - 00:28:19:17

you know, globally, the numbers are now similar to tobacco if you look at fossil fuels and ultra processed food. But that idea that tobacco was exceptional kind of got misunderstood. And I think people

00:28:19:17 - 00:28:25:21

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

mistakenly argued or understood that the tobacco industry was exceptional. It's not. These industries, we've shown this,

00:28:25:21 - 00:28:28:18

they all have the same drivers. They all behave in the same way.

00:28:28:18 - 00:28:41:03

They are influencing science in exactly the same way, they're influencing policy in exactly the same way. And so in terms of how we govern policy and approach policy, we need to take the same approaches. They should not be at the policy table. And we should not have voluntary approaches.

00:28:41:03 - 00:28:59:07

Louis

Would you argue that the profit motive induces these big industries to adopt these strategies?

Anna

Yeah, yeah.

Louis

To bring it back to tobacco again, you mentioned earlier newer products. So things like e-cigarettes and heated tobacco. How does this now fit into this contemporary picture of the industry and trying to regulate it?

00:28:59:09 - 00:29:23:11

Anna

Okay. So the interesting story here is that tobacco companies obviously they've always sold cigarettes. That's their primary product. And it remains their primary product. And it's a hugely profitable product. And so global cigarette sales started to fall because the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control had been successful. But even though for a while cigarette sales were falling, actually profits from those cigarettes were increasing.

00:29:23:13 - 00:29:47:21

And at the end of the day, the industry is primarily about profits. And so it didn't do much. And then e-cigarettes emerged on the market, actually out of China, sold by independent manufacturers. And roughly at around the same time, the profitability of cigarettes in terms of the retail value (there are

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

different ways of measuring) but the sort of the retail value that they were getting from cigarettes started falling.

00:29:47:23 - 00:30:09:04

And the interesting thing is, it's at that point where their profitability started to be threatened, that they started to buy up these e-cigarette companies and launch their own e-cigarettes, and then they moved on to heated tobacco products and all these other different, you know, nicotine and tobacco products. And they used that to claim, "Oh, we're now the good guys, we're committed to reducing harm."

00:30:09:04 - 00:30:33:03

But the reality is and the documents are clear on this, that Philip Morris, for example, you know, the world's largest transnational tobacco company had actually been researching the equivalent of e-cigarettes some decades before, but it had abandoned that, even though it knew they were lower risk, because it's thought that they would be a risk to the cigarette, that the availability of those products would increase the risk of cigarettes being regulated.

00:30:33:05 - 00:30:51:24

So they've never had an interest really in driving down harm. They're just claiming that now because their primary cash cow, the cigarette, was being threatened. And then what they've done is they've launched all of these products and they're using this to claim they're now the good guys, and they're the solution to the public health problem.

00:30:52:01 - 00:31:18:07

And what they're doing is they're manipulating the concept of harm reduction. That is a public health concept. It really first emerged in drugs. And so the idea is that you can reduce the harm from drugs, not just an individual level. So, you know, moving people from heroin to, you know, pharmaceutical equivalents if you like.

00:31:18:13 - 00:31:36:06

But you also need to reduce harm at community level and population level. But they're now misusing that concept to focus just on the individual level, because of course, if an individual smoker, they're far better off quitting. But if they can't quit, they will be better off on the on these reduced harm products.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:31:36:12 - 00:31:49:16

But that doesn't mean that opening the market to those products is going to be beneficial for health at the population level, because if young people start taking up these products, as we're seeing, the total harm could actually increase.

00:31:49:16 - 00:32:12:19

So there's this difficult balancing act. And so they're really manipulating the concept of harm reduction in that way. But also what they're trying to do is, what you need in public health, there are different types of approaches to reducing tobacco use or alcohol use and so on. One is a population level approach. So you have tax increases or an advertising ban.

00:32:12:19 - 00:32:35:18

So those cost really nothing. In fact taxes, you know, give the government money. But they have an impact at the population level. So at scale you get people changing behaviour at scale. Or you can have an individual approach, for example, encouraging smokers to quit smoking. And individual approaches alone are far less impactful in this population approaches because you have to address each smoker one by one

00:32:35:20 - 00:32:53:02

but you can have, you can do both. And the best is to do both. So, you know, you change the environment by having an advertising ban, making your cigarettes more expensive. And then ideally, you want mass marketing campaigns, which also work to encourage people to go to the stop smoking services. And if you do all of that, you can really reduce smoking.

00:32:53:05 - 00:33:07:15

But if you just take the individual approach is never going to be enough. And so what they're also trying to do, by focusing on what they call harm reduction, is push everything back to the individual level and push against these population level approaches.

00:33:08:03 - 00:33:36:02

And the other thing they're doing is using it to claim "we've transformed". You know, there's all this endless stuff that they're now the good guys but again, we've looked at this and it's absolutely clear they are not transforming. If anything, I would say that even more Machiavellian than they were in the past because they're up to the same old tricks we've shown that, you know, they're engaging exactly the same problematic scientific practices as the past, the same political practices.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:33:36:04 - 00:33:46:06

But over the top of that, they're trying to create this sort of pretence of responsibility and transformation. So it's even more Machiavellian, I would say.

00:33:46:06 - 00:33:55:22

Louis

That kind of image management element, I think is really interesting. So what do you see as the future for the tobacco industry? What might they be doing next?

00:33:55:24 - 00:34:17:11

Anna

To some extent we've touched on this in that, you know, as soon as the cigarette sales started to fall, they fight back with other products and I would say they are now multi-addiction companies. You know, they're selling a whole host of different addictive products. Cannabis is the latest. And I think you know they are ultimately experts in addiction.

00:34:17:11 - 00:34:37:24

And so I think that may continue to evolve. They will just keep continuing to find new products to add to their armament to keep people hooked on their products so they can keep making money and this brings me back to the fact that we haven't really addressed the system problem, so the trouble is that we've got is a bit like a balloon.

00:34:38:00 - 00:35:05:16

If you've got a big industry like the tobacco industry, and you squeeze its profits, it's going to find somewhere else to make profits unless we change the sort of system that is driving those, those profits. So removing the profit incentive is one of the sort of radical ideas that's been proposed for cigarettes. But I think we've reached the point where we do need to start thinking about those more radical ideas, at least in some places.

00:35:05:18 - 00:35:12:24

Louis

What for you is the most impactful of those radical tobacco control ideas?

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:35:12:24 - 00:35:29:18

Anna

People talk about this endgame term, I'm not sure the endgame is useful because, it doesn't play well politically, globally it doesn't translate very well into other languages, which is problematic. But if we look at this as a global issue, we've got to think of it place by place.

00:35:29:18 - 00:35:49:08

So there are still countries around the world with almost no tobacco control policies. So we need to move forward there. The basic policies need to go in place. In countries like ours, which do have comprehensive policies, there are two things I think to think about. One is there are still population groups with high rates of smoking, and we need to work really hard to try and support

00:35:49:08 - 00:36:14:17

those groups to quit smoking. But what we've also learned in tobacco control is you have to sort of keep innovating. You have to keep adding in new policies to keep the pressure up. And so it's exciting here that we're moving forward with this smokefree generation policy. We've got to keep de normalising the industry and de normalising smoking, because we've learned the hard way, actually, that

00:36:14:17 - 00:36:16:13

we were doing well globally in tobacco control,

00:36:16:18 - 00:36:22:02

but the industry has fought back. And I've you know spoken about how it's used that to renormalise itself. So we have to keep

00:36:22:02 - 00:36:26:02

doing that. And then I think what we need to think about is

00:36:26:02 - 00:36:29:05

how do we tackle the system problem or the supply

00:36:29:05 - 00:36:36:14

side problem, the fact that these companies are incentivised to keep selling and making profits from this stuff.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:36:36:16 - 00:36:54:06

And there's a number of ways that we could think about that. But I think one thing that really bears thinking about at the moment is a polluter pays approach. And we've been discussing that here in this country. So tobacco companies cause huge health harm and that costs the economy. But they're not paying for that harm.

00:36:54:06 - 00:37:06:01

Instead, that harm is falling on governments, on us as tax payers and on the individuals who suffer. And if the tobacco company faced, if it had to face the costs that it caused,

00:37:06:01 - 00:37:14:02

the incentives would change, you know. And so moving towards an approach where the industry, what we call a polluter pays approach, pays for the harm

00:37:14:02 - 00:37:14:23

that it caused,

00:37:14:23 - 00:37:16:15

can change the incentives in the system.

00:37:17:00 - 00:37:18:18

We've got some specific,

00:37:18:18 - 00:37:20:05

proposals which we don't

00:37:20:05 - 00:37:20:20

need to go into

00:37:20:20 - 00:37:22:12

here around how you might

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:37:22:12 - 00:37:32:14

a polluter pays approach. But the principle is, I think, clear that they should be paying for the harm that they cause, and that would change the incentives in the system.

00:37:33:10 - 00:37:35:01

Another one of the

00:37:35:01 - 00:37:36:06

key

00:37:36:06 - 00:37:37:21

drivers I think we need to

00:37:37:21 - 00:37:39:02

address

00:37:39:02 - 00:37:59:11

is the way that the tobacco industry and other corporations influence science. So we know (a) that they're all doing the same thing, and (b), that this manipulation of science has delayed progress in addressing tobacco, harm from fossil fuels, understanding of climate change and so on,

00:37:59:13 - 00:38:10:05

you know, across the board. And so there really is a need to make sure that science can operate in the public interest and

00:38:10:05 - 00:38:25:10

not only do we know that all these corporations are influencing science in the same way, we also know that private sector funding of science is increasing, but public sector funding of science is stagnating, so the problem is likely to be worsening.

00:38:25:12 - 00:38:56:24

We also know, and this is probably linked, that public trust in science is falling. And that's an issue, we saw that that was an issue during Covid 19. And if you think about corporations influencing science, what happens is we have these bodies of work that the industry have created that are

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

misleading. So when you come to review the science in an area, there's a huge body of science that the industry has put there and then a smaller body of independent science.

00:38:56:24 - 00:39:15:00

If you look at the science in its entirety, like through a systematic review, you could be highly misled. So I think that, you know, protecting science and ensuring science functions in the public interest is going to be a key way to help reduce tobacco use in the long term, but also to address these wider Commercial Determinants of Health.

00:39:15:02 - 00:39:38:12

And, I think, there's obviously a few things we can do, but one is, in the shorter term, I think, to have a single online database of authors, and editors, conflicts of interest that all journals use. So that when I submit a paper to a journal, instead of every time having to fill in a form for that journal, there is just a database online and the journal can then look me up.

00:39:38:14 - 00:39:52:06

But obviously that needs to be sort of externally managed, so that we can be sure that all these people working for industry who don't, by the way, declare their conflicts of interest or not, not consistently, that, you know, that they're all detailed. And that would make it

00:39:52:06 - 00:39:52:13

hard

00:39:52:13 - 00:39:55:13

for the industry to circumvent the existing policies.

00:39:55:15 - 00:40:20:23

But I think we also need to look at changing how science is funded. And I think a key way to do this is through a mandatory tax on corporations to fund independent science. So that tax would then have to set up a pot that's then administered independently. There are models through which that is working. There is one in Thailand with a tax on tobacco and alcohol, there's one in Italy,

00:40:20:23 - 00:40:39:20

actually, the tax on pharmaceuticals and there's another one in California. And there is some work looking at the sort of the rules, what you would need, that structure to have in place in order to

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

ensure that science could function in the public interest. But I think that's another key thing that we need to address.

00:40:40:04 - 00:40:42:04

Louis

Professor Anna Gilmore, thank you very much for joining us.

00:40:42:10 - 00:40:43:08

Anna

Thank you.

00:40:43:08 - 00:40:48:18

Louis

And the sources for today's discussion can all be found in the episode shownotes.

00:40:48:18 - 00:40:59:14

We'll be back next week, where we'll be joined by Britta Matthes and Karen Evans-Reeves to talk about how Big Tobacco undermines and circumvents the laws designed to regulate the industry.

00:40:59:14 - 00:41:04:13

From the Tobacco Control Research Group. You've been listening to Deadly Industry:

00:41:04:13 - 00:41:05:19

Challenging Big Tobacco,

00:41:05:19 - 00:41:14:16

hosted by Louis Laurence. Produced by Kate White and edited by Sacha Goodwin. The production manager is Jacqueline Oliver.

00:41:14:16 - 00:41:23:05

You can email us at Tobacco-admin@bath.ac or find us on X, LinkedIn and Bluesky.

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.1

00:41:23:05 - 00:41:29:03

Louis

This is a University of Bath production.