

EDITORIALS AND OPINION

SAN DIEGO UNION TRIBUNE

March 21, 2007

Opinion/Editorial:

Thank you for not smoking at UC

By John Moores

Moores is a regent at the University of California. He was appointed by Gov. Gray Davis in 1999.

The University of California, almost certainly the world's greatest public institution of higher education, has a problematic partner which, according to the World Health Organization, was responsible for 100 million deaths in the 20th century. WHO projects the death count will rise to 1 billion in this century.

UC's partner, of course, is Big Tobacco, which in 2007 will fund about \$15 million for research at UC. Few are naive enough to believe that the tobacco industry is merely interested in improving the health of Americans, 430,000 of whom die annually from tobacco use, according to the U.S. surgeon general. WHO reports that a person dies worldwide every 10 seconds due to smoking-related diseases and that tobacco is the "biggest killer, much bigger – than all other forms of pollution."

Several of the UC regents, including Chairman Richard Blum and myself, oppose the university's allowing its vaunted medical research capability to be associated with the tobacco industry. Nevertheless, some faculty argue that, to preserve academic freedom, each faculty member should be solely responsible for dealing with moral and ethical issues about tobacco industry funding. Many faculty members, however, are quite troubled by the lack of a system-wide policy and want to kick tobacco money off UC's campuses.

The prestige of the University of California is attractive to tobacco companies. Formerly secret tobacco cartel papers reveal that the tobacco industry sought, through careful selection of research projects and, sometimes, researchers who were “friendly” with the industry, to prolong public uncertainty about any link between disease and tobacco use.

Because there is considerable stigma associated with research performed directly for a tobacco company, the tobacco industry infamously and secretly established in 1988 the Center for Indoor Air Research, which sought to trivialize the impact of secondhand tobacco smoke. (In 1992, focusing on the financial bottom line, Philip Morris found that employees in a smoke-free workplace quit smoking at an 84 percent increased rate.)

This notorious “Center,” which was disbanded as a requirement of a 1998 agreement with 46 state attorneys general, funded a researcher at UCLA, who concluded that the dangers of “environmental tobacco” were exaggerated and not supported by the data he reviewed. The American Cancer Society furiously disagreed, noting that the UCLA report had been cited many times by tobacco lobbyists when communities considered establishing smoke-free laws.

This is not new information to UC's powerful Academic Senate, a parliamentary body representing the faculty. The Senate, which expressed its “deep disapproval” of at least some tobacco-funded medical research, still may prefer to leave research funding decisions with the conscience of each of the university's 60,000 academics. This spring, however, the University of California will finally decide if it wants to continue accepting tobacco money for research.

The university can find guidance in its deliberations from many highly regarded sources in addition to WHO and the U.S. surgeon general. Numerous universities already have decided that they can do their world-class research without the tobacco industry's money. Various UC departments reached the same conclusion, only to be overruled by the Academic Senate. The American Medical Association recently urged UC to stop accepting research funding from the tobacco industry. The CEO of the American Cancer Society similarly wrote to the UC regents, rejecting the UCLA researcher's conclusions about secondhand smoke.

Moreover, a distinguished federal judge recently concluded that defendant tobacco companies were guilty of violating the federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, or RICO, because of the tobacco industry's fraudulent actions and its dishonest relationship with research institutions. The judge's opinion specifically cited the tobacco-funded research at UCLA.

UC's regents, who clearly respect UC's stellar faculty, are reluctant to establish any policy that does not sit well with the Academic Senate. However, the regents almost certainly will make a decision that makes sense for California if the Senate does not act soon.

It is unlikely that a UC restriction on tobacco funding would work much hardship on research because worthy science is routinely funded in our society. Equally important, ridding UC of tainted tobacco money will protect the academic integrity of California's great public university.

© Copyright 2007 Union-Tribune Publishing Co.