



## **Tobacco industry fears of the World Conference of Tobacco or Health**

The last two of the major World conferences on tobacco control (Chicago 2000, Helsinki 2003) have produced attacks on the extent of conference attendance by New Zealanders. The attendance has been described as a 'junket', and members of Parliament have questioned the need for the number attending (under 40 at each conference).<sup>1,2</sup> There is also a history of tobacco industry efforts to undermine World tobacco control conferences.<sup>3</sup>

First, why should the tobacco industry be so concerned with the World conferences? A general advantage of multinational tobacco companies is their ability to operate across borders. To some extent, they are able to operate outside the borders of jurisdictions that wish to increase health and economic growth by reducing tobacco-related harm.

In comparison to this transnational ability, governments and tobacco control workers are less resourced for and less able to operate at an international level for tobacco control. World conferences provide an opportunity for researchers, officials, advocates, and others to exchange ideas and make linkages across borders, to effectively combat tobacco industry harm. The conferences have also been one of the major opportunities to build support for the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which is beginning to provide an international legal framework to control the tobacco industry.

The World tobacco control conferences reflect the diverse, multidisciplinary nature of tobacco control. The conferences are, in practice, a number of conferences rolled into one. Smoking cessation specialists, health economists, health media practitioners, taxation researchers, regulatory lawyers, and many others who contribute to better health, find a unique chance to further their understanding and skills.

Thus we can ask why we do not have more, not less, people going to the World tobacco control conference this year in Washington? Every attendee to these conferences brings back an improved knowledge of how the worldwide tobacco industry can be controlled. Funders who support health and economic gains in New Zealand should be encouraged to fund attendance at the Washington and other tobacco control conferences.

We need to ask why New Zealand Government agencies that are responsible for areas affected by tobacco use are not effectively represented by attendance at such conferences. For instance, Treasury (tobacco-use negatively affects the economy,<sup>4,5</sup> Social Development (tobacco-use increases child poverty and other adverse social outcomes<sup>6,7</sup>), Corrections (prisoners smoke at inequitable levels, many jurisdictions have successful smokefree prison policies<sup>8</sup>), Environment, and other departments.

For better New Zealand health, fewer addicted young New Zealanders, and fewer New Zealand families/whanau devastated by cot deaths, let us work towards having more than 40 New Zealanders attend this year's World tobacco control conference,

and let us ensure that they effectively bring back their experience there to improve New Zealand social and economic outcomes.

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