

THE PRESS Complaints Commission has rejected a complaint by Ash, the anti-smoking group, against *The Sunday Telegraph* over an article on the links between passive smoking and lung cancer.

On March 8, this newspaper revealed that the World Health Organisation (WHO) had published an abstract of a 10-year study into the effects of passive smoking. It reported that the study had found no statistically significant link between lung cancer and passive smoking.

The article was headlined "Passive smoking doesn't cause cancer — official". ASH (Action on Smoking and Health) complained that the headline and an accompanying editorial contained inaccuracies. It said that *The Sunday Telegraph* had wrongly interpreted the WHO statistics.

Clive Bates, the director of Ash, said the study had shown a positive correlation but, on account of the small sample size, it was not possible to show with 95 per cent confidence that there was a definite link.

*The Sunday Telegraph* defended its coverage as fair and accurate. It said that the study had found no statistically significant link and that this had been summed up in the headline.

In its adjudication, the commission said that in subsequent editions the newspaper had reported criticisms of the original articles.

It said that the newspaper had undertaken to publish a further article after the full report — it was published earlier this month — and invited the WHO to submit a letter for publication.

"However, before the WHO had responded, the full report was published and the newspaper fulfilled its earlier commitment by publishing the story headlined 'Study fails to link passive

by JONATHAN PETRE

smoking with cancer'.

"The article also quoted from the complainant's press release and said that his [Mr Bates's] original objection had largely been about the headline 'Passive smoking doesn't cause cancer — official'. The piece explained that the word 'official' related to the provenance of the research — the WHO.

The commission said "it considered that the most sensible way of resolving the matter was for the editor to publish a further piece when the study was published, which he had done.

"The commission, in examining the entire coverage of the report, therefore considered that the substance of the complaint by ASH had been resolved ... The complaint was not upheld."

Dominic Lawson, editor of *The Sunday Telegraph*, said: "Naturally I'm pleased that the Press Complaints Commission has decided that *The Sunday Telegraph* did not breach the Code of Practice in respect of accuracy.

"We at no stage said either that smoking itself was not harmful nor that passive smoking could not cause bronchial problems in small children.

"We obviously stand by our original story that official WHO statistics have found no significant correlation between passive smoking and lung cancer and I hope that ASH will in future campaign about the real damage caused by smoking rather than imaginary damage."

Amanda Sandford, the research manager for ASH, said last night: "We find this ruling totally unsatisfactory. We continue to believe that *The Sunday Telegraph's* original report was inaccurate. As far as we are concerned the matter is not resolved."

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# Complaint over article on passive smoking is rejected

# When scientific fashion goes up in smoke

**I**NACCURATE, distorted, misleading ... based on an elementary logical error ... dupes of the tobacco industry ... it shows deep disrespect and contempt for readers, who have been misled and let down by the reporting of this issue." Those were some of the reactions when *The Sunday Telegraph* reported that a study by the World Health Organisation had failed to find a statistically significant link between passive smoking and lung cancer. Mr Clive Bates, director of Action on Smoking and Health, complained to the Press Complaints Commission that this newspaper had breached the commission's code on accuracy. His complaint developed from "inaccurate, distorted and misleading" to "grossly inaccurate, distorted and misleading".

Last week the commission announced the result of its investigation and hearing into ASH's complaint. The commission sensibly insisted that it could not take a view on whether or not passive smoking caused lung cancer. But it concluded that *The Sunday Telegraph* had not distorted the conclusions of the WHO study. It therefore decided not to uphold ASH's complaint.

ASH, which up until now has instantly published all correspondence with the commission on the internet, has not put the adjudication on its internet site, despite promising to do so as soon as it was announced. A spokesman says that ASH "does not accept" the commission's ruling. That is depressing, but perhaps not very surprising. ASH exists to lobby public opinion against smoking. It is a pressure group, and as such it is not likely to take a neutral view of the evidence.

What is more startling is the way that many distinguished figures from the medical and scientific establishment share ASH's attitude. The WHO study not merely failed to find a statistically significant relationship between lung cancer and pas-

sive smoking; it also found a statistically significant *diminution* in lung cancer in children whose parents smoked, a fact that *The Sunday Telegraph* reported. The *British Medical Journal* accused *The Sunday Telegraph* of "naivety" and of failing to understand the obvious fact: passive smoking causes lung cancer. Despite the fact that its own study stated that it had not found a statistically significant link between passive smoking and lung cancer, scientists from WHO said that its study had been misreported: passive smoking causes lung cancer. Even Kenneth Calman, who up until last month was Britain's Chief Medical Officer, stressed that "passive smoking causes lung cancer".

That conclusion is not supported by WHO's official study, delivered to the organisation's director, Gro Brundtland. Of course, future work may demonstrate that passive smoking *does* cause lung cancer. But the WHO study does not. That study, the largest ever undertaken in Europe, was commissioned by WHO in the expectation that it would establish the link between passive smoking and lung cancer. WHO chose the number of people involved — 2,000 — specifically because they believed it would be large enough to show up the relationship between second-hand smoke and lung cancer unequivocally. It didn't.

What is the appropriate response to such a finding? The rational response is surely not simply to discount it and say it doesn't matter — that it must be wrong because we know that passive smoking causes lung cancer. Yet surprisingly that seems to have been the characteristic response of many of the experts.

It is a natural human failing to discount evidence that does

not accord with your preconceived opinions. But science is based on overcoming that pervasive human failing. The development of new scientific theories depends on investigators being willing to entertain hypotheses that contradict orthodoxy, and on the ability to change beliefs as the evidence changes. You would expect the WHO finding to have generated at least some scepticism among scientists about the proposition that passive smoking causes lung cancer, even if the prior evidence for the connection was strong.

But the prior evidence was not particularly strong. Most of the previous studies did not find a statistically significant connection between passive smoking and lung cancer *either*. A study that put all the previously published studies together and analysed them *did* find such a connection — but results obtained in that way, which involves a good deal of statistical manipulation, are usually thought to be less than completely reliable.

It is established practice to discount such a result if one big trial fails to replicate it. That is what happened, for example, in the case of the alleged connection between leukemia and overhead pylons:

although an analysis of small studies found a statistically significant link, one large trial failed to replicate that result. The prevailing view now is that

overhead pylons do not cause leukemia.

Why, then, isn't there more scepticism about whether the link between passive smoking and lung cancer has been established? Why has there been such a concerted attempt to discredit *The Sunday Telegraph* merely for accurately reporting WHO research that found no statistically significant basis for that link?

You can't get anything more politically incorrect than tobacco — apart, of course, from tobacco companies. And the WHO report's negative finding was certainly welcomed by the tobacco companies. Tobacco companies manufacture the only product on the market that will kill a high proportion of people who use it exactly as those companies intend. They have consistently denied the fact that cigarettes cause lung cancer and heart disease in people who smoke them, lied about their own scientific research which proved it more than 30 years ago, and bullied, intimidated

and attempted to bribe conscientious researchers. Some of them have also made concerted attempts to market cigarettes to children, the most vulnerable and easily addicted group in the population.

Still, the nastiness of many tobacco companies does not prove that passive smoking causes lung cancer. In fact, the one has nothing what-

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*Alasdair Palmer* on the campaign to discredit this newspaper's coverage of passive smoking

soever to do with the other: the truth about passive smoking and cancer is not going to be discovered by meditating on the awfulness of tobacco companies, no matter how long and hard that topic is discussed.

But, amazingly, the response to *The Sunday Telegraph's* report shows that is exactly the way some scientists seem to think: if a research finding turns out to be in the interests of tobacco companies, that's enough to prove it can't be true. It doesn't matter how reputable or independent the research which led to it. The tobacco companies welcomed the result of the WHO study. Tobacco companies are horrible. Therefore, the WHO study can be discounted. QED. Falling for that fallacy is the essence of unscientific, indeed illogical, thinking. But point that out, and it simply proves that you are a "dupe of the tobacco industry".

There is a further explanation for why there is a deep reluctance to acknowledge that the link between passive smoking and lung cancer has not yet been established. The best argument for continuing to permit smoking in public places is the liberal one which maintains that people should be free to do things that harm themselves, provided they do not harm anyone else in the process. If passive smoking causes lung cancer, that would be one way to destroy that argument, and so to end toleration of smoking. It would transform smokers from being merely reckless, into being actively murderous. For campaigners, the usefulness to the cause of linking passive smoking to lung cancer means there is an overwhelming temptation to assume that link must exist — irrespective of the evidence for or against it.

Once again, the commitment of the zealots renders them incapable of a dispassionate view of the evidence. That's what seems to have happened to Tessa Jowell, the Health Minister, who originally wanted to impose a blanket ban on smoking in all public places — an attitude which makes sense if you think smokers kill others by their habit, but not otherwise.

There is a perfectly good case for the less drastic step of banning smoking at work — or in sections of bars and restaurants — and it does not require anyone to twist the facts. Passive smoking can cause bronchial problems, particularly in asthmatics. Smokers also cause immense irritation to people who don't share their habit. Non-smokers now compose the majority of Britain's population, and they do not have to wait 30 years to discover the unpleasant effects of smoke.

The response to the WHO study, and to *The Sunday Telegraph's* reporting of it, reveals the extent to which scientists seem to be willing to ignore or discount evidence when it suits them. Since many aspects of public policy, from regulations over the food industry to airline safety, are based on advice from scientists, that is extremely alarming. In how many other areas is evidence being ignored or dismissed because it doesn't fit with the prevailing orthodoxy? Science and scientists have immense prestige. We trust them to be supremely rational — we have to, because their conclusions control our lives and much of our money, yet for the most part, we do not have the time or the ability to scrutinise the conclusions they come to.

The reaction of many scientists to the WHO report suggests that that trust may not be entirely merited. "Monkeys can put two and two together" read a headline last week. Unfortunately it seems that quite a lot of scientists can't. That has menacing implications for the rest of us.

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