Policymakers’ ignorance of New Zealand Government investment in tobacco companies

In a recent study, we explored the knowledge and attitudes amongst a small sample of policymakers about the tobacco-related policies. The aim of the study was to pilot the use of in-depth interviews of key informants for tobacco policy in the New Zealand setting.

Methods—10 interviewees were selected from:

- Politicians who currently had, or had previously had some role in tobacco policy in the past 10 years, or had commented publicly on tobacco policy in that period; and
- Senior government officials who were in a position to affect or comment on tobacco-related policies.

One of us (Sheena Hudson) interviewed a politician from each of five political parties; some holding or having held relevant ministerial portfolios, or holding shadow portfolios. The other five participants were managers or senior advisors from the Ministries of Health, Education and Social Development, whose roles involved or had involved them in legislation, advice to ministers, or policy implementation related to tobacco.

The audio-recorded interviews were on the basis of anonymity, and involved a semi-structured questionnaire format. They were conducted during May–August 2006.

Results—The interviewees’ comments indicated that they knew the general directions of tobacco company activities. They were sceptical of the motives of the tobacco companies’ attempts to be community or health minded, and believed that these companies were engaged in successfully selling a product that was harmful to health. All but one of the participants were clear in their opinion that promotion of tobacco to under 16 year olds still occurs in New Zealand.

However, all 10 interviewees appeared ignorant of the investment by the five Crown Financial Institutes (New Zealand Superannuation Fund, the Government Superannuation Fund, the National Provident Fund, the Accident Compensation Corporation [ACC], and the Earthquake Commission) in tobacco companies. They did not appear to have heard of, or have remembered, the media reporting of research that in December 2005 revealed the extent of this investment (e.g. 1–3). This was despite this media coverage detailing the New Zealand Government involvement in the announcement of the research, including the presence of the Minister of Finance as a speaker at the release of the report on this investment.4

Discussion—While the Minister of Finance has stated that Government has ‘clear and transparent policies for the holding and management of Crown financial assets’,4 it appears that there is still a considerable need for him to inform Members of Parliament and government officials about investments which may prejudice New Zealand’s reputation. Since December 2005, there appears to have been no change in
As the level of knowledge about such investment is so low, even amongst those closely concerned with tobacco-control policymaking, perhaps even wider action is needed. If the Minister of Finance wishes to be seen to have clarity and transparency about Crown investments, the New Zealand Government may also need to be much more proactive about informing the public about government investments. This is particularly so for investments such as these, which may prejudice New Zealand’s reputation, and which definitely endanger New Zealand and international public health.

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Sheena Hudson  
Research Fellow

George Thomson  
Research Fellow

Nick Wilson  
Senior Lecturer

Department of Public Health, University of Otago
Wellington

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