

## 27<sup>th</sup> Collegium Ramazzini Statement

# An Ill-Considered Partnership between the American Journal of Public Health and the Tobacco Industry Threatens the Scientific Credibility of the Journal and the Integrity of the American Public Health Association

### *Collegium Ramazzini*

The Collegium Ramazzini is an international scientific society that examines critical issues in occupational and environmental medicine with a view towards action to prevent disease and promote health. The Collegium derives its name from Bernardino Ramazzini, the father of occupational medicine, a professor of medicine of the Universities of Modena and Padua in the late 1600s and the early 1700s. The Collegium is comprised of 180 physicians and scientists from 35 countries, each of whom is elected to membership. The Collegium is independent of commercial interests.

Foundation for a Smoke-free World to publish their scientifically unfounded views in *The American Journal of Public Health*.

By giving Dr. Yach and his colleagues space and a platform in the official journal of the American Public Health Association, the editors have assisted the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World in its ongoing efforts to convey the mistaken impression that Dr. Yach's opinions represent a legitimate scientific opinion, when in fact Dr. Yach's expressed views and those of his Foundation are anything but representative of the current scientific consensus.

The Collegium Ramazzini recommends that the Executive Board of the American Public Health Association (APHA) and the *AJPH* Editorial Board to take the following two actions:

First, the APHA Executive Board must adopt a formal policy position rejecting any collaboration or funding of any kind from the tobacco industry and its front groups. This position will align APHA with the World Health Organization, the World Federation of Public Health Associations and leading, respected public health organizations across the United States and around the world.

Second, the editors of *AJPH* must publish a formal statement in the journal retracting the articles by Dr. Derek Yach and other individuals and organizations funded by the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World and other arms of the tobacco industry that *AJPH* published in its June 2020 issue. This retraction must be listed in Pub Med and linked in Pub Med to the citation to Dr. Yach's article.

### Scientific Background

In the United States, the use of e-cigarettes (electronic nicotine delivery systems- ENDS) is widespread and rising. In 2018, 14.9% of American adults reported that they had ever used e-cigarettes, commonly referred to as "vap-

ing”, while 3.2% were current users.<sup>5</sup> Use was highest among men, non-Hispanic white adults and persons in the 18- through 24 year age group. Use decreases as age and income increase. Adults who had stopped cigarette smoking in the last year were highly likely to use e-cigarettes and accounted for 25% of current users - an estimated 8.1 million persons. Men (17.8%) used e-cigarettes more frequently than women (12.3%).<sup>6</sup> It is estimated that 35 million people worldwide “use electronic cigarettes or ‘heat-not-burn’ tobacco products.”<sup>7</sup>

E-cigarettes first entered the market around 2007. They operate by heating a liquid solution to a high temperature that generates an inhalable aerosol. The solution contains nicotine in concentrations sufficient to create and sustain addiction. It may also contain various flavorings and humectants, substances used to reduce loss of moisture.

The chemical composition of the vapor inhaled from e-cigarettes can vary widely, and in some instances can be adulterated to contain material that can be highly toxic.<sup>8,9</sup>

While research on vaping continues, it is clear already “... that vaping is not risk free” and “... may lead to nicotine addiction and smoking especially among youth.”<sup>10,11</sup>

### Positions of Other Public Health Organizations

The World Health Organization has condemned the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World stating:

*“When it comes to the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, there are a number of clear conflicts of interest involved with a tobacco company funding a purported health foundation, particularly if it promotes sale of tobacco and other products found in that company’s brand portfolio.”*<sup>12</sup>

WHO has banned the Foundation and its representative Dr. Yach from participating in WHO meetings.<sup>13</sup> It notes that collaboration with the Foundation by a government that is a Party to the WHO Convention on Tobacco Control constitutes a clear violation of Article 5.3 of the Convention.<sup>14</sup> WHO specifically states that the public health community should not partner with the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World.<sup>15</sup>

The World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA), of which APHA is a member, issued the following statement in December 2020:

*“We are pleased that the vast majority of public health organizations worldwide rejects and disapproves any sort of collaboration with the tobacco industry. Today, the WFPHA reiterates its call on all public health associations to advocate and adopt policies that prevent any collaboration with the tobacco industry or tobacco industry front groups.”*<sup>16</sup>

The Union for International Control of Cancer (UICC), the International Network for Epidemiology in Policy (INEP), the World Heart Federation (WHF), and the American Cancer Society (ACS) have all called on public health associations to reject collaboration with or funding from the tobacco industry or its front organizations, specifically naming the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World.<sup>17</sup>

Dozens of public health professionals around the world have written to the editors of the *AJPH* since June 2020 criticizing the editors’ decision to collaborate with the tobacco industry and requesting that *AJPH* reverse this policy. In response, APHA’s Executive Director, the *AJPH* Editor-in Chief and the *AJPH* Editorial Board Chair sent a jointly signed letter rejecting this request and justifying the journal’s policy of collaboration with the tobacco industry and its front groups.

Representatives of the APHA Epidemiology Section, the International Network for Epidemiology in Policy, the Collegium Ramazzini, and others have submitted multiple letters-to-the-editor and editorial commentaries to the editors of *AJPH* and the Executive Board of APHA over the past six months opposing the journal’s *de facto* policy

of collaboration with the tobacco industry. The *AJPH* editors have failed to respond substantively to any of these questions and have refused to publish any of the letters-to-the-editor and editorial commentaries.

## Conclusion

The time has come for the APHA Executive Board and the *AJPH* Editorial Board to confront the issue of the journal's facilitating collaboration with the tobacco industry.

This is a serious matter. It can no longer be glossed over or dismissed with the comment that this collaboration was somehow "different". It has grave consequences for public health worldwide. We strongly suspect that representatives of tobacco companies are already presenting copies of Dr. Yach's *AJPH* article to Ministries of Health in low- income and middle-income countries around the world and using his printed words in this prestigious journal to argue the safety of e-cigarettes.

The Collegium Ramazzini calls on the Executive Board of APHA and the editors of *AJPH* to acknowledge their mistake, to move past the delusion that publication of Dr. Yach's mendacious views constitutes some sort of sterile academic exercise without real-world consequences, and to take an unyielding and official position rejecting any collaboration of any kind or interaction with the tobacco industry and all its affiliated organizations.

The Collegium Ramazzini suggests additionally that all individual and organizational members of APHA may wish to consider writing to the Executive Board of APHA and the editors of *AJPH* voicing their dissatisfaction with current policies and practices and urging remedial action.

## References

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