

Opinion: Will we stand idly by as tobacco manufacturers take over pharmaceutical companies?

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On July 9th, tobacco manufacturer Philip Morris International (PMI) announced its bid to acquire the British pharmaceutical company Vectura for almost one billion Euros. Vectura develops inhalers and vaporisers for pharmaceutical producers. The 200 scientists currently working for Vectura would go on to be employed by a tobacco company that first makes people sick, before selling them inhalant medicines for their lung conditions - effectively allowing PMI to cash in twice. Major British health organisations like Cancer Research UK, Asthma UK, the British Lung Foundation and ASH are calling on the British government to [block the deal](#).

A week earlier, PMI completed its takeover of the Danish [Fertin Pharma](#).

Fertin, a family firm, started out making chewing gum before expanding its range to include vitamin products, as well as nicotine gum, an aid to quitting smoking.

This takeover puts PMI in a much stronger position to ensnare consumers with all manner of new nicotine products. Will we soon see luxury food items containing nicotine? Or herbal highs with nicotine? Let's hope that the EU Ministers of Health don't let this happen!

From the presentations at [PMI Investor Day 2021](#) we can gather what PMI's short-term ambitions are. On the one hand, to establish itself in the 'wellbeing' industry with botanical products that can be used in the areas of sleep, energy and focus or relaxation. On the other, to supply lung medication for acute conditions or the reduction of side effects.

Do we have to sit idly by as the major tobacco companies penetrate curative healthcare, ensuring themselves a place at the table for debates and strategies around health? Big Tobacco has been working for some time to influence the decisions and strategies surrounding public health, notably by manipulating research - the University of Bath recently published an [interesting study](#) on this, entitled *How corporations influence science, and why they do it*. Tobacco manufacturers are known for employing science to conceal the damage they cause, and also to combat all kinds of government regulations.

Everything in the world is connected. We see this in the climate change that recently caused devastating floods in Belgium, and we also see it in health and healthcare. A virus can paralyse the whole world. Stimulants and medicines can be used as a trade-off in order to circumvent strict legislation.

Can we expect our politicians to protect our societies against this calamity? Perhaps, but they will have to take urgent, innovative action. In order to protect our health and healthcare systems, the Belgian Foundation Against Cancer as other NGOs would strongly suggest imposing levies on the tobacco companies for the damage they cause to our health. This can then be used to finance independent research, to pay for the rising medical costs resulting from smoking, and finally to invest more in prevention and smoking cessation. In the case of the environment, the mantra goes: the polluter pays. The same should apply to health matters too: those causing the damage should be held responsible and made to pay, rather than being allowed to make money from it a second time.

Will such a levy stop major deals like the one between PMI and Fertin Pharma or Vectura? No, but it does send a clear message that we will no longer stand by and watch as the major tobacco companies destroy the lives, and quality of life, of so many people.