

Tobacco Companies Were Waiting for the Opportune Moment - the Legalization of Marijuana

Documents Reveal that “Pot” Was Both A Rival and Potential Product

New York, New York, June 3—It turns out that the history of Big Tobacco companies and marijuana is more intertwined than was previously known, according to a new study in *The Milbank Quarterly*. Based on previously secret tobacco industry documents, the study reveals that, since at least the 1970s, tobacco companies have been interested in marijuana as both a rival and potential product.

As a result of litigation against the tobacco industry, more than 80 million pages of internal company documents became available at the University of California San Francisco’s Legacy Tobacco Documents Library (www.legacy.library.ucsf.edu). This study, led by Stanton A. Glantz, PhD, Professor of Medicine and Director of the Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education at the University of California, San Francisco, is the first to systematically review these documents specifically about marijuana.

The authors write that “despite fervent denials, three multinational tobacco companies”—Philip Morris, British American Tobacco, and RJ Reynolds—have all “considered manufacturing cigarettes containing cannabis. “People have suspected for a long time that Big Tobacco was interested in marijuana,” says Glantz. “The documents we review show that they have been considering legalized marijuana as both a competitor and an opportunity.”

One of the goals of the study, say the authors, is to make policymakers and public health advocates aware that tobacco companies are prepared to enter the marijuana market with the intention of increasing its widespread use. As states like Colorado and Washington legalize the recreational use of marijuana (and many others are considering it), the authors make a compelling case for policymakers to adopt regulatory frameworks similar to existing tobacco laws in order to prevent youth initiation and tame market domination by companies seeking to maximize profits with the sales of another addictive substance.

What the documents reveal

Despite public statements denying involvement in marijuana research, tobacco companies closely monitored the marijuana debate over the last 40 years. Since the 1970s, several companies have been researching product development and forecasting the legalization of marijuana, which they considered both a threat to current products and an opportunity to develop new products that contained marijuana. Since some of the files were privileged and confidential, it is still not known whether the tobacco industry was a proponent of marijuana legislation.

Here are some highlights from the study:

- As early as 1969, documents show that Philip Morris was interested in researching marijuana. A 65-page literature survey on marijuana was conducted, listing chemical, biological, and pharmacological information about marijuana “because legalization of marijuana had ‘possible’ implications for smokers,” write the authors. Philip Morris

was also interested in analyzing smoke from *Cannabis sativa* in a similar way that they analyzed tobacco smoke, including toxicity, inhalation and carcinogenesis studies. They contacted the US Department of Justice (DOJ) and offered to do the analysis, as a help to the DOJ—but an unsigned memo to top management at Philip Morris made it look as though the DOJ was asking PM to do the work and not the other way around.

- British American Tobacco had a strictly confidential “pot” project. Researchers there believed that nicotine and marijuana were not direct competitors because of the way each acted on the brain, but that if marijuana became legalized, a blended product could be developed.
- There was special interest in menthol cigarettes, particularly in Brown & Williamson’s Kool brand. Focus groups revealed that mentholated cigarettes were often smoked after marijuana since they relieved the dryness of marijuana and could “sustain the high.” From the 1970s to late 1990s, tobacco companies strategically marketed menthol cigarettes to the youth and African American markets.

Implications for health policy

For an “on the ground” view of the realities of these new policy dilemmas, the study is accompanied by a commentary by Colorado Governor John W. Hickenlooper in which he acknowledges that, as one of the first states to legalize marijuana, “Colorado is a testing ground for this experiment in marijuana legalization....” In determining regulations, Colorado has turned to examples from the alcohol, gaming and tobacco industries when it comes to underage use and the impact on public health. He believes the state is “asking the right questions” and “attempting to collect the right data,” while focusing on the well-being of Coloradans.

“As marijuana is decriminalized, policymakers need to guard against Big Tobacco or other powerful corporate interests from bringing modern branding, marketing and product engineering to bear on marijuana,” says Rachel Barry, MA, one of the study authors. The third author is Heikki Hiilamo, PhD, Professor of Social Policy at the University of Helsinki.

Some of the same regulations that have been applied to tobacco could be applied to marijuana, say the researchers. These include restrictions on advertising; taxation; prohibiting free samples, flavored products and products that also contain nicotine; no brand-name sponsorship of events; and warning labels on packaging as well as no sales in vending machines, no point-of-sale advertising and Internet sales. Smoking marijuana should not be allowed anywhere where smoking conventional cigarettes is not allowed.

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Contact:

Judith Zimmer
Communications Director
Milbank Memorial Fund
212-355-8400
jzimmer@milbank.org