



STOPPING TOBACCO
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STOP Monitoring Brief: Tobacco Industry responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

Edition 1: Covering the period March 20 – April 16, 2020

April 23, 2020

This is the first in a series of updates summarising monitoring of the Tobacco Industry (TI) response to the COVID-19 pandemic from [STOP, a global tobacco industry watchdog](#). This initial update covers the an approximate 4-week monitoring period. It is not intended as a comprehensive list of all TI responses, but as a chance to share the trends and emerging patterns being observed from multiple sources. There will be a new issue every two weeks and in between we invite readers to [share information](#) or leads about additional examples or new trends.

MAJOR TRENDS IN THE FIRST MONITORING PERIOD

- **Increased focus on corporate social responsibility (CSR)** via targeted donations in materials or money.
- Industry highlighting how their **historic investment in pharmaceuticals** could assist in vaccine development.
- Policy interference in **response to COVID-19 related regulation** of tobacco products sale and manufacture.
- **Attempts to confuse the science around smoking and COVID-19** and using this confusion to promote next generation products.

The industry has used the pandemic as a chance to criticise public health organisations such as the WHO, often through third parties^{1 2}, and the WHO has in turn cautioned governments against working with Big Tobacco³.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

CSR has been a prominent part of the TI pandemic response. It is likely seen as a good opportunity to clean up public image and encourage governments to work with the industry, in contravention of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Previous investments in biotech and pharmaceuticals are paying off, adding to the impression that they are 'part of the solution'.

- **Donations.** Around the world tobacco corporations, in particular PMI and BAT, have been donating ventilators ([Greece](#)), PPE and hand sanitiser ([Bangladesh](#), [USA & Canada](#), [Philippines](#), [Nigeria](#), [Kenya](#), [Georgia](#)) and money to pandemic relief ([Brazil](#), [Romania](#), [Bulgaria](#), [South Africa](#), [India](#), [Lebanon](#), [Uganda](#)).
- **Vaccine development.** Both [BAT](#) (through its subsidiary Kentucky BioProcessing) and [PMI](#) (40% share in Medicago) are involved in coronavirus vaccine development, using tobacco plants as viral particle 'factories'^{4 5 6}.



LOBBYING AND POLICY INTERFERENCE

Lockdowns have forced governments to decide if tobacco products should be listed as 'essential items', and whether to continue their sale or not. The industry lobbying and interference has broadly been in response to:

- a) Lockdown regulation.
 - b) The effects of the pandemic on business operations.
 - c) Opportunistic response to global uncertainty.
- A trend has emerged around next generation products (NGPs) as **pro-vaping groups push back against planned regulation of NGPs**^{7 8}, capitalising on the uncertain science around COVID-19 and vaping risks. The UK Vaping Industry Association ([UKVIA](#)) has called for vape shops to remain open, following the examples of France, Italy and Spain⁹. PMI and other industry funding has been linked to much of the pro-vaping pandemic response¹⁰, with particular criticism from the industry and its allies levelled at New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and Professor Stanton Glantz of the Center for Tobacco Research Control & Education at UCSF¹¹.
 - **In Indonesia, Tobacco control advocates have called on the President to impose tobacco product restrictions** in response to the pandemic¹². They ask for a restriction on industry donations and an increase in tobacco tax and prices. Taxation is an area that STOP researchers at the University of Bath expect to actively monitor as the COVID-19 situation progresses.
 - **In New Zealand (NZ) tobacco was listed as 'essential' and the NZ [Imperial](#) factory remains open**¹³. In other countries with 'essential products' lists in force, tobacco has been effectively banned. For example, some Indian states have banned chewing and spitting tobacco, backed up by harsh jail sentences¹⁴. Sale of tobacco has also been banned nationally¹⁵.
 - Russia has imposed similar bans, halting tobacco manufacture. This prompted **lobbying from the big four tobacco companies, arguing that it would lead to a growth in [illicit trade](#)**¹⁶. Also in Russia, [PMI](#) has used the pandemic to push its heated tobacco product, IQOS, partnering with a delivery app to get the product to people in lockdown¹⁷.
 - In South Africa the national government banned all tobacco sales early in the crisis¹⁸, with **some local restrictions being lifted**¹⁹ **in response to lobbying from industry advocates and [BAT](#)**, again using the 'illicit' argument²⁰.
 - In Pakistan the health system is already under strain from smoking-related disease²¹. **PMI successfully lobbied to reopen its factory, despite evidence of black-market tax avoidance** and an initial restriction on tobacco sales²².
 - **PMI also maintained cigarette production in Brazil** (Santa Cruz do Sol), to avoid "compromising the business", despite a decree banning non-essential industrial manufacture²³.

MISREPRESENTING RESEARCH

As data emerges examining the risks of smoking, lung disease and COVID-19, the industry has seized upon any research that calls into question the growing evidence base linking tobacco products and progression of COVID-19. Peer reviewed studies that highlight increased COVID-19 severity in smokers²⁴ have been selectively



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ignored by the industry in favour of non-peer reviewed studies that conclude smoking is not an associated risk factor²⁵.

- **A non-peer reviewed study conducted by Dr. Konstantinos Farsalinos** “to examine the prevalence of current e-cigarette use and current smoking among hospitalized patients with COVID-19 in China.”²⁶ concludes that a below average number of smokers are being hospitalised with COVID-19 and suggests that it may be down to the role of ACE-2 receptors and a “protective effect” of nicotine. Farsalinos has previously received e-cigarette sponsorship. This paper has been widely reported as ‘Nicotine Stops COVID-19’ in the Daily Mail²⁷ and elsewhere, along with similar conclusions by [Foundation for a Smoke-Free World](#) funded, [Dr. Riccardo Polosa](#).
- The harm reduction debate continues amidst the pandemic although some have raised concerns about the risk of increased COVID-19 transmission²⁸ (touching mouth, blowing vapour) and severity²⁹ (unknown lung damage) when using next generation products, though the science is uncertain. This uncertainty has been presented as evidence that there is no risk and **Farsalinos and Polosa have both posited the anti-viral benefits of nicotine and propylene glycol inhalation**³⁰.

FUTURE BRIEFINGS

We welcome any contributions on issues mentioned in this update or anything related to COVID-19 and the Tobacco Industry. Contact us at bath@exposetobacco.org. The next update will be on May 6 2020.

Visit the [Tobacco Tactics](#) website for further background on the companies and people mentioned in the update. COVID-19 page coming soon...

¹ <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/world-health-organization-coronavirus-response-975543/>

² <https://www.vapingpost.com/2020/04/16/vietnam-who-rep-spreads-misinformation-and-proposes-e-cig-ban/>

³ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/be-wary-of-working-with-big-tobacco-says-who-bf0qlxbtk?shareToken=3afc39a1ee0fb8f71fd34df0c228e028>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/apr/01/british-american-tobacco-plant-based-coronavirus-vaccine>

⁵ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-01/coronavirus-vaccine-race-gets-unlikely-partner-big-tobacco>
<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8175855/BAT-claims-Covid-19-vaccine-breakthrough-using-tobacco-plants.html>

⁶ <https://www.businesslive.co.za/fm/money-and-investing/2020-04-09-the-smoking-irony-of-bats-covid-19-vaccine/>

⁷ <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO2003/S00303/rushed-vaping-bill-during-covid-19-grossly-unfair.htm>

⁸ <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/pharma-and-life-sciences/altria-asks-fda-to-delay-regulatory-deadline-due-to-coronavirus>

⁹ <https://www.vapingpost.com/2020/03/26/covid-19-update-some-eu-countries-allow-vape-shops-to-remain-open/>

¹⁰ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-17/philip-morris-money-is-funding-pro-vaping-coronavirus-spin>

¹¹ <https://www.spiked-online.com/2020/04/15/no-vapers-are-not-at-greater-risk-of-catching-covid-19/>

¹² <https://www.mangalorean.com/will-indonesia-mitigate-covid-19-by-enforcing-stronger-tobacco-control-and-ratifying-global-tobacco-treaty/>

¹³ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/120654996/coronavirus-cigarettes-are-essential-mbie-confirms>

¹⁴ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/covid-19-in-bihar-spitting-in-public-places-will-cost-6-months-in-jail/story-sdBM0dMz77V2bSuQkn5a6L.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/liquor-tobacco-gutka-sale-lockdown-coronavirus-1667134-2020-04-15>

¹⁶ <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2020/04/01/826842-krupneishie-tabachnie-kompanii>

¹⁷ <https://vesti.ua/mir/glovo-i-igros-nachali-sotrudnichat-v-prilozhenii-poyavilis-stiki-i-ajkosy>

¹⁸ <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/lifestyle/when-is-lockdown-over-south-africa-can-buy-cigarettes-south-africa-garden-route/>

¹⁹ <https://citizen.co.za/business/business-news/2264298/bheki-cele-warns-da-led-western-cape-that-sale-of-cigarettes-remains-illegal/>



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- ²⁰ <http://www.702.co.za/articles/380254/regulation-on-cigarettes-doesn-t-discourage-smoking-british-american-tobacco>
- ²¹ <https://qrius.com/pakistans-tobacco-epidemic-leaves-it-in-no-state-to-fight-the-coronavirus%E2%82%AC%80%9C>
- ²² <https://www.brecorder.com/2020/04/06/586804/companies-begin-resumption-of-operations-in-pakistan/>
- ²³ https://theintercept.com/2020/04/06/coronavirus-philip-morris-cigarettes/?fbclid=IwAR1aX7ii6UmHjn83S9KaAZJ5WssEvxxWAN0hSQsf0dIA_tkdxBGTs2X8UxM
- ²⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7083240/>
- ²⁵ <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.04.08.20057794v1.full.pdf>
- ²⁶ <https://www.qeios.com/read/article/561>
- ²⁷ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8214749/David-Hockney-claims-smoking-cigarettes-PROTECT-against-coronavirus.html>
<https://www.rtl.fr/actu/bien-etre/coronavirus-la-nicotine-molecule-du-tabac-une-protection-pour-les-fumeurs-7800400562>
<https://al-akhbar.com/Community/287247>
- ²⁸ <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20200331/p2a/00m/0na/021000c>
- ²⁹ <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-vaping/smoking-or-vaping-increases-risks-for-those-with-coronavirus-nyc-mayor-idUKKBN20V0Z0>
- ³⁰ <https://reason.org/commentary/does-vaping-increase-your-risk-of-getting-coronavirus/>