**CANADIAN MEDICAL STUDENTS UPDATING POSITION ON TOBACCO – Tobacco Industry’s Interference in the Development of Governmental Policies through Front Groups & Plain and Standardized Packaging of Tobacco**

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**Introduction**

In 2009, the CFMS affirmed its position against tobacco so as to protect society’s health and made strong recommendations concerning the “ban of flavoured tobacco products,”1 “education of medical students on tobacco products and tobacco cessation,”1 “implement[ation] of tobacco-free campus policies,”1 and “tobacco-free policies in parks, recreational facilities, indoors, and other public areas.”1 It also discussed and detailed robust evidence on tobacco-free places, tobacco advertising, flavoured tobacco products, cigarillos, smokeless tobacco, and e-cigarettes.1

These measures are currently part of the Canadian legislative landscape or becoming more prevalent with time. However, other paramount issues have not been legislated or appropriately implemented, and the CFMS has yet to set its stance on them. Hence, the present is to further the CFMS’ position on tobacco by proposing the addition following topics: tobacco industry’s interference in the development of governmental policies through front groups and plain and standardized packaging of tobacco. Furthermore, when reading the present, one should consider the evidence disclosed in the position paper adopted in 2009. Note that FMEQ (Quebec Federation of Medical Students) supported Bill no°44, which concerns plain packaging,2 and the former has been supported by both FMEQ and IFMSA-Quebec (International Federation of Medical Students’ Associations) through the signing of Charles-Antoine Barbeau-Meunier (IFMSA-Quebec, VP External Affairs of 2016-17) and Philippe Simard (FMEQ, VP Political Affairs 2016-2017) of a letter sent to all Quebec elected officials in June 2017.3 Finally plain and standardized packaging of tobacco products has been adopted by McGill University’s Medical Students’ Society (MSS) during its last general assembly, on March 21, 20174 and some of the propsed packaging-requirements have already been recommended by the paper adopted in 2009.1

**Background**

More than 60 years have passed since smoking has been known to jeopardize health.5 Tobacco contains more than 70 chemicals causing, initiating, or promoting human cancer and other diseases.6-8 Lung cancer is the second most prevalent type of cancer, but carries the highest cancer mortality rate for both sexes in Canada.9 In 2015 alone, lung cancer killed about 20,900 Canadians.10 85% of lung cancers can be attributed to tobacco, be it through smoking or second-hand smoke.4, 11 Lung cancer alone cost approximately 3 billion dollars in Canada in 1998.12 However, smoking is a risk factor for many other diseases, such as esophageal cancer, pancreatic cancer, colon cancer, myocardial infarction (heart attack), pulmonary diseases, and others. Hence, in 2012, smoking killed over 37,000 Canadians.8 In fact, in that year, the economic burden of smoking reached almost 21.3 billion dollars across the country,13 In contrast, tobacco taxes generated only 8.4 billion dollars in Canada in 2015.14 Given the tremendous burden tobacco causes on the human, material, and financial resources of our health care system, we, all Canadian medical students, stand firmly against the tobacco industry.

**Interference of Tobacco Industry’s Front Groups in Governmental Policies**

On July 15, 2003, Canada signed World Health Organization’s (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Thereby, Canadian governments on all levels are engaged to “se[t] and implemen[t] their public health policies with respect to tobacco control, [so as to] act to protect these policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry in accordance with national law.”15 While this should ensure health protection against tobacco through the building of healthy tobacco-policies, Canada has not respected this framework unfortunately.

For instance in Canada and in Quebec, the tobacco industry still works to influence municipal and provincial decisions on health policy. A great example of this is through the number of meetings between elected officials and members from suspect organizations like the Canadian Convenience Stores Association (CCSA) and its regional chapters.16-18 A document from Imperial Tobacco was leaked and handed over to the media, and as the *National Post* and *La Presse* report, the CCSA has obtained the support of dozens of municipalities against contraband; a support that the tobacco industry utilizes to prevent the adoption and implementation of effective tobacco-control measures, such as banning menthol cigarettes, raising taxes, and implementing standardized and plain packaging of tobacco.16-18

While freedom of speech is a universal right, transparency is equally important. One not only needs to critically examine speeches and messages, but also messengers: what drives the CCSA to support such a position? Is their judgment free from influence, or are they paid to do so? In the case of the CCSA, the critical question is where their funding comes from. Though they have been asked this multiple times, this question remains unanswered.16-18 The only logical explanation to this lack of transparency is that by revealing their funds, they would lose their credibility: i.e., they are only a front group for the tobacco industry.16-18 Recent internal documents16 have provided evidence that this group, like many other organizations, acts as front groups for the tobacco industry. Thus, by allowing this influence from the CCSA, politicians are in violation of Article 5.3 of the WHO’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

**Recommendations on Tobacco Industry’ Interference in Governmental Policies through Front Groups**1. Recognize that, as stated in the media, the CCSA has been used by the tobacco industry to raise the question of contraband in order to prevent the adoption and implementation of effective tobacco-control measures, such as banning menthol cigarettes, raising taxes, and implementing standardized and plain packaging of tobacco.16-18

2. To implement Article 5.3 of the WHO’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, stating that Canada is required to “se[t] and implement[t]… public health policies with respect to tobacco control, [so as to] act to protect these policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry in accordance with national law as a signatory of the WHO’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control;”15

3. To oblige associations and other entities defending pro-tobacco positions or profiting from tobacco production, transformation or sales, including non-profit organizations, to disclose the amount and source of their funding.

**Plain and Standardized Packaging of Tobacco Products**

As marketing techniques used by the tobacco industry to attract new smokers have already been described in the adopted position paper,1 background information to this topic will be kept brief.

The tobacco industry utilizes a myriad of advertisement techniques to increase its clientele. For instance, through the use of flavors, the tobacco industry increases the appeal of its products, especially for youth. Another example is, by marketing *slim and super-slim cigarettes*, they target women. In 2012, Australia decided to prioritize the health of its citizens and mandate that tobacco products be only sold in plain and standardized packaging. Despite the industry’s disinformation campaign claiming that plain packaging does not decrease smoking and increases contraband – positions based on generally discredited research such as the KPMG study funded exclusively by the tobacco industry19 –, Australian smoking rates have decreased at “record levels”20 and there is no evidence contraband has increased.

Finally the Liberal Party, led by Justin Trudeau, promised in 2015 to “introduce plain packaging requirements for tobacco products, similar to those in Australia and the United Kingdom.”21

**Recommendations on Plain and Standardized Packaging of Tobacco Products**

1. To demand that the Liberal Party, led by current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, respects its electoral promise of 2015 to “introduce plain packaging requirements for tobacco products, similar to those in Australia and the United Kingdom.” 21

2. To have the following elements be the Canadian requirements in the future legislation for plain and standardized packaging of tobacco products:

“[I] Plain and standardized packaging would prohibit all promotional features on all tobacco packaging, including the use of colours, images, logos, slogans, distinctive fonts, and finishes.

[II] Only the brand name would be allowed and it will also be subject to restrictions[; h]ealth warnings would remain on packages.

[III] The size and shape of the package would be standardized, thus prohibiting specialty package formats, such as slim and superslim cigarette packages that reduce warning size and overtly target women.

[IV] The appearance of cigarettes would also be standardized, at a minimum prohibiting the use of branding, logos, colours and special finishes, and establishing standards for cigarette length and diameter.”22

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