
Action on Smoking & Health (ASH)
Coalition québécoise pour le contrôle du tabac
Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada

Medicago, Philip Morris and Health Canada: A predictable and avoidable fiasco

Health groups urge the Federal government to pressure Medicago to align its approach with that of the World Health Organization

Edmonton, Ottawa, Montreal, March 22, 2022 — Canadian health groups are supporting the reported refusal of the World Health Organization (WHO) to approve Medicago's COVID-19 vaccine because of the pharmaceutical company's ties to the tobacco industry.

The organizations are calling on Canadian governments to align their approach with WHO's by finding a suitable investor to replace Philip Morris as a major shareholder in Medicago. Medicago has already signalled that it is seeking alternative investors and the Canadian and Quebec governments should help facilitate such a transition.

"There is a simple pathway to get this vaccine approved. Our governments should stand up to Philip Morris. Instead of asking the WHO to contravene its own tobacco control treaty, which was ratified by Canada and 181 other countries, the federal Minister of Health and his Quebec counterpart should focus their energies on convincing the tobacco giant to withdraw as a shareholder of Medicago. This solution is the easiest and most ethical way to resolve the situation," says **Flory Doucas, Codirector and spokesperson for the Coalition.** "

"The WHO should not be pressured into contravening its own public health treaty by approving the Philip Morris vaccine. We respect and support the WHO's decision to stand by the treaty and avoid participating in a tobacco industry corporate whitewash scheme," adds **Les Hagen, Executive Director of Action on Smoking & Health (ASH Canada).** "In 2018, the Canadian government championed a motion at the tobacco control treaty talks in Geneva urging 181 nations to sever their ties with tobacco companies. Unfortunately, the federal government failed to take its own advice when it chose to finance the Philip Morris vaccine. Indeed, it's very disturbing to witness the government collaborating with a tobacco company in open defiance of a global public health treaty that Canada ratified 17 years ago."

"Tobacco industry products kill more than eight million people annually, including 50,000 in Canada, which is more than all deaths resulting from COVID-19 to date. The tobacco industry is the main vector of diseases caused by smoking and continues to vigorously fight against effective tobacco control measures. It is imperative to counter the influence of Big Tobacco by preventing them from positioning themselves as 'partners' of governments, particularly on public health issues," explains **Cynthia Callard, Executive Director of Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada.**

Article 5.3 of the [WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control](#) (FCTC) obliges parties to ensure that their policies are protected "from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry." [Guidelines](#) for implementing this obligation make clear that "the tobacco industry should not be a partner in any initiative linked to setting or implementing public health policies, given that its interests are in direct

conflict with the goals of public health.” Parties are directed that they “should not endorse, support, form partnerships with or participate in activities of the tobacco industry described as socially responsible.”

These obligations were recognized last November at the 9th session of the FCTC Conference of the Parties of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control with a [declaration](#) that parties should avoid tobacco industry involvement in policies and actions associated with COVID-19. This resolution stresses the need to “remain aware of the inherent and irreconcilable conflicts between the tobacco industry’s interests and public health policies” as well as the need for countries to continue to protect the industry’s public health policies, even in times of crisis.

In fact, when the federal investment in Medicigo was announced in October 2020, Philip Morris issued a [global](#) news release stating that this collaboration is good for its business: “Better outcomes can be achieved when governments and companies join efforts to promote shared objectives for the greater good.”

Philip Morris is primarily a manufacturer of lethal products. In a context where the multinational continues to actively oppose smoking reduction measures, it is clear that the company is not an ally of public health.

Years have passed since Health Canada [gave assurance](#) that “due consideration” would be given to developing guidelines for use by federal and provincial officials to ensure that Canada’s obligations to protect health policies from industry influence were met against the intrusion of tobacco companies into the health care field. “Unfortunately, Canada’s delay in putting up proper shields against tobacco industry influence led to public funds being invested in a Philip Morris’s partially owned company. Health Canada should prioritize the development of these guidelines and make all political decision-makers aware of the power and effectiveness of the tobacco industry’s influence,” adds **Ms. Doucas**.

“We support WHO’s stand against engaging with tobacco companies. The Canadian government should demand that Medicigo replace Philip Morris with an investor that does not compromise Canada’s compliance with the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control and its overall public health objectives.”

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