Case 76
The Tobacco Use Programs
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Background. Tobacco use is the largest single cause of preventable deaths in the United States. Over 400,000 people each year die of tobacco-related health problems such as lung cancer and heart disease. And cigarettes are, of course, addictive. Over 65 percent of smokers say they want to quit. Over 50 percent, in any given year, make a serious effort to do so. Only 2.5 percent of them succeed. The addictive nature and health risks of smoking are universally acknowledged. But this was not always the case. As recently as 1994, the chief executives of the nation’s seven largest tobacco companies each swore, in testimony before Congress, that he believed neither nicotine to be addictive, nor cigarettes to be harmful. The estimated annual burden of tobacco-related health problems, on the American health care system, is $80 billion in direct expenditures and an additional $50 billion in indirect costs.

In 1990, the Board of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation selected Dr. Steven Schroeder to serve as the Foundation’s president, understanding clearly that Dr. Schroeder was interested “in taking the Foundation in the direction of working on substance abuse problems.” At the time, no American foundations were involved in the fields of tobacco policy or research. In fact, the loudest voice in the public health debate over tobacco was that of the Tobacco Institute, an organization created by the tobacco companies to communicate their message to the news media and the public.

There were many risks associated with entering the field, especially considering the enormous political heft of the tobacco industry, which has annual sales of over $45 billion. However, the magnitude of the health risks associated with tobacco made it a tough issue to ignore. The Foundation’s Board was initially deadlocked on the issue, but, once the proposal was narrowed to focus the Foundation’s efforts on underage tobacco use, the Board agreed, adopting as a primary goal, “[The reduction of] the harmful effects, and the irresponsible use, of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs.”

Strategy. Between 1991 and 2003, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation spent approximately $408 million on a wide range of tobacco-related programs. The Foundation’s primary aims have been to reduce the incidence of youth smoking, to publicize the negative health effects of tobacco use, and to help addicted smokers quit using tobacco. These goals have been pursued through a wide range of programs, including:

- **SmokeLess States:** Started in 1993, SmokeLess States is a state-level initiative designed to assist local groups in educating their communities about tobacco and about the policy options available to regulate it. SmokeLess States coalitions also offer prevention and treatment programs targeted primarily at teenagers. To date, the Foundation has contributed approximately $92 million to the program, every dollar of which is matched by the local coalitions receiving support.

- **The Center for Tobacco-Free Kids:** The Center is the RWJF’s largest national endeavor to curb smoking. The Center was created by the Foundation, in partnership with the American Cancer Society, and was intended to serve as a proactive counterweight to the Tobacco Institute. Since 1995, the Foundation has provided over $70 million to the Center.

- **The Tobacco and Substance Abuse Policy Research programs:** There is an enormous
range of factors that influence a person’s decision to smoke, and, likewise, a wide range of concerns in any tobacco policy discussion. Recognizing that no one field of inquiry can possibly encompass the multiplicity of angles from which tobacco can be viewed, the Foundation has funded research exploring such issues as the biological and societal factors that can lead to nicotine addiction, the relationship between cigarette prices and consumption, and many others. Particularly important has been the RWJ-funded research into the elasticity of demand with respect to the price of cigarettes. The Foundation has used its leverage as a funder and an acknowledged leader in tobacco policy discussion to convene experts from a range of fields to promote the sharing of insights and the undertaking of multidisciplinary research into tobacco issues.1117

- **The Sports Initiative:** Through this endeavor, the Foundation seeks to enlist professional athletes and sports leagues to publicly discourage young fans from using tobacco. Of particular note is the National Spit Tobacco Education Program (NSTEP), a partnership between the RWJF and Joe Garagiola, a former major-leaguer who for years has recruited fellow baseball stars to help break the stereotypical association between baseball players and spit tobacco.

- **Smoke-Free Families:** While the bulk of the Foundation’s resources have been dedicated to research and prevention, funds have also been allocated to tobacco cessation programs. The flagship of these efforts is the Smoke-Free Families program, which targets pregnant women and single mothers, offering them information and cessation assistance in view of the serious health effects that smoking can have on their unborn children and infants.

**Outcomes.** Many of the programs supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation have had a significant effect on the huge national debate over tobacco. SmokeLess States coalitions are active in thirty-one states and the District of Columbia. By publicizing such information as the public-health effects of second-hand smoke and the effect of excise taxes on tobacco consumption, the coalitions have contributed to the enactment of many local laws regulating the sale and consumption of tobacco products. Foundation-funded research showing that children’s consumption of cigarettes declines as price increases has provided the impetus for passage of tobacco tax increases in states across the nation. The Center for Tobacco-Free Kids has received significant public attention. In the late 1990s, it was asked, by the Attorneys General of several states, to participate, as a disinterested and trustworthy party, in the states’ negotiations with the tobacco industry over pending litigation. The Center received much criticism from its allies in the anti-tobacco movement when this was publicized, and a combination of interests from the far left (opposed to any deal with the tobacco companies) and the far right (opposed, for political reasons, to any regulation of cigarettes) narrowly defeated the agreed-upon settlement.1118 The National Spit Tobacco Education Campaign has been publicly supported by such All-Stars as Alex Rodriguez, Lenny Dykstra, Hank Aaron, and the late Mickey Mantle. And a wide range of other outcomes have flowed from RWJF tobacco programs. Foundation-sponsored research, for example, was cited repeatedly by the FDA in its determination to seek jurisdiction over tobacco products, and RWJ-supported experts have advised Members of Congress and testified before Congressional committees.

**Impact.** The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation was certainly not the first nonprofit organization to involve itself in tobacco research and advocacy. But the RWJF brought to bear the enormous resources of a major funder, and had the courage to tackle a problem that, for political reasons, the federal government had been hesitant to touch. The Foundation was able to convene and support a wide spectrum of influential actors, and, in so doing, serve as a private center of power in the interest of the public—polyarchical in every way. The Foundation, along with partners like the American...
Cancer Society, blazed a trail that many others have followed."

Joe Garagiola, for example, had been working to spread awareness of the threat posed to young baseball players by spit tobacco for years before the RWJF sought him out. But with the Foundation’s help, he was able to take his message much more powerfully to scale. Garagiola himself recalls, “until Robert Wood Johnson came along, I was working with a broken bat—now I have a Louisville Slugger.”

Despite the controversy surrounding its participation—and the eventual collapse of the settlement it negotiated—the Center for Tobacco-Free Kids has clearly been seen as a key fixture in discussions about tobacco control. This is demonstrated by the fact that its involvement was directly sought, first by the state Attorneys General, but also by the FDA and the White House. And the Center has succeeded as a counterweight to the Tobacco Institute. In fact, so discredited has the tobacco companies’ message been that they shut down the Institute several years ago.

Since 1995, smoking rates among adults have declined by 12.6 percent and among teens by 18 percent. With a problem so enormously complicated, the Foundation’s influence cannot be called determinative. However, since 1991, the Foundation has been at the forefront of tobacco research, education, advocacy, and treatment. As Sidney F. Wentz, then-Chairman of the its Board of Trustees, wrote elegantly in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s 1992 Annual Report: “There’s no sword to cut through this Gordian knot, but we, as a Foundation, are obliged to keep picking at the strands of it with unremitting determination if we are ever to achieve our goal of improved health care for all Americans.”

Notes


1108. Philip Morris, the nation’s largest cigarette manufacturer, proclaims on its website, that “Philip Morris USA (PM USA) agrees with the overwhelming medical and scientific consensus that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema and other serious diseases in smokers. Smokers are far more likely to develop serious diseases, like lung cancer, than non-smokers. There is no safe cigarette.” See http://www.philipmorrisusa.com/.


1114. The estimated 435,000 people per year killed by tobacco was more than four times the number estimated to die as a result of alcohol (100,000) and more than twenty times the number estimated to be killed by illegal drugs (20,000). See Hughes, “Adopting the Substance Abuse Goal: A Story of Philanthropic Decision Making.”

1115. These five programs are only a sample of the Foundation’s many undertakings in tobacco and substance abuse-related areas. I believe they are indicative of the breadth and depth of the Foundation’s involvement in tobacco issues, and they include the most significant examples of RWJ efforts on several fronts of the effort.


1120. Other private foundations now involved in tobacco research, advocacy, and control include the Commonwealth Fund, the Ford Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and others.
