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Influence of Tobacco Industry on Decision Makers and the Role of NGOs in Tobacco Control in Austria

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The Austrian tobacco industry is owned by Japan Tobacco. Nevertheless the ministry of finance looks at this tax payer as a productive industry and disregards that the costs of smoking outweigh the state income from tobacco tax and reduction of old-age pension due to premature deaths of smokers. Overall an annual economic loss of 511.4 million Euro was found.¹ Similar close connections exist between the tobacco industry, the chamber of commerce and the ministry of economy, which is also responsible for youth protection.

A historical chance was lost in 1993 when the minister of health Außerwinkler presented a new tobacco law at a WHO conference in Vienna, which he had prepared in close cooperation with the NGO "Austrian Council on Smoking & Health" (www.aerzteinitiative.at). At that time this was the most advanced tobacco legislation in Europe. The tobacco lobby, however, succeeded to eliminate all sanctions for violation of non-smoker protection and Dr. Außerwinkler lost his job as minister. His successors drew back and the next conservative governments blocked all progress in tobacco control, except for fulfilling the EU directives.

Not even the poor remainder of non-smokers protection in the hospitality industry was enforced². NGOs were silenced and excluded from policy processes and funding. Reports to EU and WHO were whitewashed and the ministry of health invested mainly in public relation agencies for the purpose of pretending. Up to now secret funding of political parties, politicians and media is possible. Usually lobbies are consulted, but not scientists. When tobacconists complained about cheap cigarette imports from Slovenia, they were given more money from tobacco sales and got permission to sell energy drinks, sweets, etc. (attracting children) and to profit from more tobacco advertising, not only inside the shop, but also around it and on plenty of vending machines.

There is no levy on tobacco tax dedicated for smoking prevention, while taxes of 60 million Euro are taken from underaged annually.³ Prevention is left to specialists for illegal drugs who play down the role of tobacco, and to volunteer work at NGOs. Some progress was seen from EU directives, in particular from banning tobacco advertising in media, however, the distribution of newspapers is still in the hand of tobacconists and the tobacco industry continues to use the chamber of commerce as its spokesman and its old networks with the media.

The main hope of nonsmoking employees in the hospitality industry is a directive of commissioner Andor. Some hope is connected to a facebook initiative, which collected support from more than 100.000 persons this year and now plans to start a referendum for smokefree restaurants, bars, cafes, etc. A self-help group of cancer patients reported thousands of violations of the existing tobacco law in these premises. I acknowledge the help of medical students to measure exposures from passive smoking and to distribute flyers of the HELP-EU campaign. Most obliged I am to Dr. Petric, who informed me on the application of Dr. Kdolsky for the position of a director at WHO-Europe, which could be prevented.

¹ Pock M et al. 2010. Economic effects of smoking in Austria and government earnings from cigarette consumption of underaged. *Atemw.-Lun genkrkh* 36 (3), in press

² www.aerzteinitiative.at/Law-A09.html

³ Neuberger M & Pock M 2009. Government earnings from cigarette smoking of adolescents in Austria. *Wien Klin Wochenschr* 121 (15–16): 510–514.