

Suit filed against anti-smoking group over links to 'Big Tobacco'

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A FORMER EMPLOYEE has filed a suit against the Smoke-Free World foundation, charging she was fired after raising concerns the non-profit was taking orders from tobacco companies, including promoting teen vaping.

In the whistleblower suit filed in New York earlier this week, the foundation's former director of digital and social media, Lourdes Liz, maintains she was wrongfully sidelined and subsequently fired after raising questions about its ties to "Big Tobacco".

A foundation spokesperson told AFP in an email that "while we have not yet filed a formal response to the complaint, we intend to deny the material allegations and defend against it vigorously".

The foundation was set up in 2017 with full financial backing from Philip Morris International (PMI), but claims to be independent and committed to "ending the world's billion smokers' addiction to cigarettes".

It says it is working to help adult smokers quit or, if they are not able to do so, move to "safer" alternatives like e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products.

Anti-tobacco activists have long voiced scepticism about the independence of the foundation and about the largely industry-backed science behind claims that vaping is safer than regular cigarette use.

In her lawsuit, Liz charges that the foundation held strategy meetings with PMI and Altria, a significant shareholder in vaping brand Juul.

The suit also said the foundation's founder, Derek Yach, a former top official at the World Health Organisation, had instructed staff to take points from an Altria press release and work them into foundation materials.

And it alleges the foundation has been downplaying the health risks of electronic cigarettes and even promoted them through programmes aimed at teens.

The foundation has in fact basically been "a marketing arm for Big Tobacco", according to the suit, maintaining that it thereby was in violation of its tax-exempt non-profit status.

The foundation spokesperson insisted that while it was funded by "annual gifts" from PMI, it was "independent from PMI" and that under its founding bylaws, "PMI and the tobacco industry are precluded from having influence over the foundation's use of funds".

The spokesperson also stressed that the foundation “strongly condemns vaping among youth and teens, just as we condemn smoking among youth and teens”.

Anti-tobacco advocates meanwhile said the allegations in the lawsuit supported what they had long suspected.

“If ultimately proved true, the pattern of close communication and cooperation between the foundation and Philip Morris, along with the efforts to minimise the risks of e-cigarettes outlined in the lawsuit, will destroy any myth that the foundation is anything other than an arm of Big Tobacco,” Matthew Myers, head of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, said in a statement.