

Anti-smoking group accused of serving interests of tobacco industry

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A controversial anti-smoking foundation is being sued by a former employee, who claims she was fired for raising concerns about its ties with the tobacco industry.

The Foundation for a Smoke-Free World was set up in 2017 with a mission to “end smoking in this generation”. The New York-based group was backed financially by Philip Morris International, one of the world’s largest tobacco groups, which originally pledged to contribute \$80m annually to the tax-exempt organisation.

Lourdes Liz, who until February last year worked as the foundation’s director of social media, filed a lawsuit in a New York court on Wednesday alleging that her former employer had carried out activities “designed to increase the profits of and to do the bidding of” Philip Morris and its former parent company, Altria.

The lawsuit claimed that Ms Liz had been forced out of her job after she questioned why the foundation was promoting vaping in the name of tobacco reduction.

It is still too early to determine the long-term health impact of vaping and scientists are divided on whether it is appropriate to encourage smokers to switch to products branded as “reduced risk” by tobacco groups. The vaping industry has also come under fire following a surge in use among teenagers, with regulators clamping down on fruity flavours and advertising targeted at adolescents.

The lawsuit filed by Ms Liz claimed that the foundation’s president Derek Yach had together with advertising firm Ogilvy proposed campaigns featuring Instagram influencers performing vaping tricks, such as blowing bubbles. The campaign, which never went live, was “clearly targeted at teenagers and adolescents”, the lawsuit read.

Ms Liz argued that the foundation’s positive attitude to vaping as a way to reduce smoking served the tobacco groups, which have in recent years invested heavily in smoke-free nicotine delivery products but faced strict restrictions around advertising.

Philip Morris’ flagship Iqos device works by heating up tobacco to a lower level than conventional cigarettes. The product is marketed in the US by Altria, which also owns a third of Juul, a vaping brand that has borne the brunt of the political backlash against the industry.

The Foundation for a Smoke-Free World said it had not yet filed a formal response to the complaint but added it intended to “deny the material allegations and defend against it vigorously”.

“The Foundation strongly condemns vaping among youth and teens, just as we condemn smoking among youth and teens,” it said, adding that it was “committed to helping adult smokers quit smoking or switch to tobacco harm reduction products”.

The group said it was funded by “annual gifts” from Philip Morris but stated that it remained independent from the tobacco group.

Philip Morris declined to comment. Altria and Ogilvy, which no longer counts the foundation as a client, did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The World Health Organization has previously refused to work with the foundation citing its ties to the tobacco industry. This is despite Mr Yach being a former director at the WHO and one of the people who helped write the organisation’s framework on tobacco control, which has been adopted as legally binding by hundreds of countries.