

**In 2008, I had the letter below published in the Lancet with a reply by Julio Frenk, head of Instituto Carso de la Salud was published. I then wrote a reply, which was not published. I publish it here for the public record.**

**Simon Chapman**

## **Group Carso, health philanthropy, and tobacco**

**The Lancet 2008; 371:1243**

[Simon Chapman a](#)

In their account of the large boost for health philanthropy provided by the Carso Foundation (Jan 12, p 100),<sup>1</sup> the ten members of the Carso International Advisory Committee significantly failed to mention the major and still current tobacco industry interests of Carso's funder, Carlos Slim, reputedly now the world's wealthiest man.

Group Carso, which Slim controls, until recently had majority ownership of Cigarros la Tabacalera Mexicana (Cigatam), Mexico's largest tobacco company; Philip Morris Mexico owned 49.9% of shares. In July, 2007, Philip Morris International (PMI) announced an agreement to buy an additional 30% of shares from the joint venture with Group Carso (which would keep 20% of shares). The acquisition is valued at US\$1.1 billion. PMI's press release on the deal quoted the President for the PMI Latin America and Canada region: "Our relationship with Grupo Carso and its founder, Carlos Slim Helú, has proven to be extremely successful and we look forward to further growth of our business in Mexico." The release continued: "Carlos Slim Helú will continue to serve as an advisor to Philip Morris Mexico, S.A. de C.V. and will remain an active partner in our Mexican tobacco business."<sup>2</sup>

Not to put too fine a point on this, Slim is a direct beneficiary of massive sales of tobacco, with all the attendant death and chronic disease that flows from that commerce. Can we hear again from Carso board members, particularly George Alleyne from the WHO's Pan American Health Organization, on how they reconcile their presumed commitment to the spirit and obligations of WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control with their knowledge of how their Institution's beneficiary earns some of his money? What do they imagine Philip Morris actually means when it writes about Slim's continuing "active partnership" with it?

A crime boss who places a cheque for \$10 000 in the church alms box each Sunday is still a crime boss. A tobacco industry baron who funds health philanthropy still has a day job that promotes the use of products that kill untold thousands. Those advising on the public management of such

generosity need to explain how they have navigated the important ethical concerns arising here.

I declare that I have no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Alleyne G, Aninat E, de Ferranti D, et al. Instituto Carso de la Salud: a boost for health philanthropy. *Lancet* 2008; 371: 100-101. [Full Text](#) | [Full-Text PDF \(171 KB\)](#) | [CrossRef](#)

2. Philip Morris International. Philip Morris International announces agreement in principle to acquire additional 30% stake in Mexican tobacco business from Grupo Carso <http://www.philipmorrisinternational.com/PMINTL/pages/e...> (accessed March 12, 2008).

## Affiliations

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<http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140673608605498/fulltext>

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## Correspondence

### Group Carso, health philanthropy, and tobacco

### Response from Instituto Carso de la Salud

**The Lancet 2008; 371:1243-1244**

[Julio Frenk](#)

Although Simon Chapman's letter discusses a Comment by members of the International Advisory Committee of the Instituto Carso de la Salud,<sup>1</sup> it is more appropriate for the staff of the Institute to clarify some of his misleading allegations.

First, the great majority of investments by Carlos Slim are not in tobacco but in telecommunications, financial services, infrastructure, and retailing. These economic activities have been estimated to generate close to 250 000 jobs directly throughout Latin America.

Second, as stated in Chapman's letter itself, Carlos Slim has already sold most of his former tobacco holdings.

Third, as clearly spelled out in the *Lancet* Comment, the endowment of the Instituto Carso de la Salud is based entirely on shares of the largest cellphone company in Latin America (América Móvil) and of an infrastructure firm that promotes development and employment in the region (Ideal). No funds whatsoever derive from any financial or industrial interests in the tobacco industry.

Fourth, the members of the Carso International Advisory Committee serve in their individual capacities and do not represent their respective institutions. Since the letter explicitly mentions Sir George Alleyne, we would like to stress that he was invited to serve on that Committee because of his many accomplishments as a leader in global health and does not in any way represent the position of the Pan American Health Organization, from which he retired in 2003 as Director Emeritus.

In addition to providing these factual clarifications, we cannot overlook the fact that the core of Chapman's letter to *The Lancet* contains verbatim material from an editorial published in the journal *Tobacco Control*.<sup>2</sup> Leaving aside the questionable practice of submitting the same material to different publications, this editorial contains inappropriate statements that must be addressed. To begin with, there is an abuse of moralistic language, which should have no place in a serious scientific journal, to the extreme of comparing Slim with the devil. Furthermore, Chapman indulges in cultural stereotyping, which is offensive to people of Latin heritage, when he writes that there is a “conga line” applauding Slim.

In fact, it is impossible to read Chapman's editorial and letter without noticing his double standards. A significant number of foundations, universities, and other civic organisations in rich countries have been established thanks to fortunes that were entirely or mostly derived from tobacco. Other reputable foundations have been endowed through the proceeds of investments in alcohol, fast food, and other harmful industries. Yet none of them is subject to the kind of inflammatory rhetoric that Chapman selectively directs at one of the few instances of significant health philanthropy emerging from a developing country.

I recommend an alternative, evidence-based, and more constructive approach. Serious research should be undertaken to examine the streams of finance to foundations and other non-profit entities that derive from harmful industries, as well as from corporations that do not apply the highest standards of labour rights, gender equity, and environmental security. Based on collective, expert analysis, guidelines could then be produced to promote transparent and ethical behaviour from all parties, in a way that places the pursuit of health equity as the supreme value.

This is not, however, the value that emerges from Chapman's invective. Cultural stereotyping and biased finger-pointing do not serve to advance the worthy cause of the tobacco control movement. Before building himself up into such a harsh judge of others, Chapman would do well to examine the sources of his own prejudiced view of the world.

I declare that I have no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Alleyne G, Aninat E, de Ferranti D, et al. Instituto Carso de la Salud: a boost for health philanthropy. Lancet 2008; 371: 100-101. [Full Text](#) | [Full-Text PDF \(171 KB\)](#) | [CrossRef](#)
2. Chapman S. International tobacco control should repudiate Jekyll and Hyde health philanthropy. Tob Control 2008; 17: 1. [CrossRef](#)

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<http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140673608605504/fulltext>

## My comment (unpublished by Lancet):

Julio Frenk makes a number of accusations:

1. **I self-plagiarised my own [Tobacco Control editorial](#).** In fact I sent the Lancet my TC editorial in my covering letter to them, advising that I had already raised the issue, but seeing that Lancet had published their piece on Carso, would they be interested in running my letter so that Lancet readers could consider the issues? The only "verbatim material" from my TC editorial is the factual material in the second paragraph, including the telling quote from the PM release about how much they value Carlos Slim's on-going assistance.
2. **George Allayne was signed in the Lancet article as being from PAHO,** but now we are told by Frenk that Allayne "does not in any way represent the position of the Pan American Health Organization" So why then did Allayne sign himself as being from PAHO?
3. **I compared Slim to the Devil!** In my [TC editorial](#), I in fact quoted the founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth, talking about taking money from the "devil" as a way of discussing the ethical question of whether ill-gotten money could ever be used by the virtuous. The "devil" is plainly a metaphor for ethically questionable sources. Frenk entirely avoids engagement with this, instead attacking my "moralism".
4. **My "cultural stereotyping":** In my [TC editorial](#) I wrote: "There is now a conga line of health and poverty relief agencies and researchers applauding Slim's philanthropy". The expression "conga line" is in common usage. It literally means a line dance, but is a common metaphor for people enthusiastically lining up to pursue a common purpose. I have never heard it used in any culturally perjorative way, and certainly never used it that way

myself ([Wikipedia](#): "A conga line can also refer to an organized system of people trying to acquire enough referrals to get a free gift").  
A Prof David Henry wrote in an e-letter to the Lancet:

"Julio Frenk's response to Simon Chapman's letter seems to indicate considerable sensitivity regarding the links between Instituto Carso de la Salud and big tobacco. This is understandable. But his ad hominem attack on Chapman is over the top. To accuse someone of self plagiarism by using a section of text in an editorial and in journal correspondence borders on the absurd; as does the accusation of cultural insensitivity over Chapman's use of the phrase 'conga line'. A 'conga line of suckholes' was the phrase famously used by the then leader of the Opposition in Australia in referring to the way that conservative politicians were lining up behind President George W Bush in his disastrous enterprise in Iraq. That was insensitive but it was not directed at people 'of Latin heritage'. This would be the same as claiming that "to waltz with the Devil" is insensitive to Austrians."

**5. Double-standards:** I have made many attacks over many years on tobacco industry philanthropy in 1st world nations, as a few seconds searching on PubMed would have shown him. The implication that I am now selectively targeting my message to developing nations is demonstrably wrong. Moreover, the argument that one cannot raise concerns about tobacco industry philanthropy without simultaneously raising concerns about fast food and alcohol philanthropy is plainly silly. For example, we do not reply to a person who attacks water pollution by noting that they have nothing to say on air pollution. We do not tell a gun control advocate that their concerns are unworthy because more people die on the roads. The WHO is not advocating for people to stop drinking alcohol or to never eat fast food. It is advocating that people should stop using tobacco altogether. These are important and fundamental differences.

The fact remains that Carlos Slim continues to be a major shareholder in Mexico's largest tobacco company, and has since become a member of the [board of directors](#) of Philip Morris International. Frenk fails completely to answer my question about the meaning of Slim's continuing "active partnership" with PM.

The only substance of his reply is to argue that Slim's financial empire is administratively and ethically petitioned, enabling him to put money from his telco into his health philanthropy, and his tobacco money elsewhere. Apparently, we should all feel at moral ease at learning this.

Simon Chapman