

Konstantinos Farsalinos, MD, MPH

Email: kfarsalinos@gmail.com

Date: 22 December 2020

Defamatory content in an article by Vpro-Argos

Dear editor,

I was informed about an article published by Vpro-Argos, titled “*Petites "celles et grandesmanoeuvres de l'industriedu tabac pour réhabiliter la nicotine*”, written by Par StéphaneHorel, Ties Keyzer ("The Investigative Desk"), Eva Schram ("The InvestigativeDesk") and Harry Karanikas ("The Investigative Desk"). The content of the article concerning myself is **clearly and intentionally defamatory, damaging for my reputation and insulting for my scientific integrity and ethics**. Furthermore, some of the authors failed to present their own conflicts of interest relevant to their funding source, which creates a serious transparency issue.

For start, it is inappropriate that the authors of the article from “The Investigative Desk” failed to disclose their funding from the University of Bath, as clearly mentioned in their website (<https://investigativedesk.com/about/>). The University of Bath has a long, established anti-nicotine agenda and has received millions of US dollars in funding by the Bloomberg foundation (<https://www.bath.ac.uk/announcements/major-funding-announcement-puts-bath-tcrg-at-centre-of-new-20-million-global-industry-watchdog/>). Both Bloomberg and the University of Bath have a rich history of ad hominem attacks against anyone who publishes studies relevant to nicotine and tobacco harm reduction that support their role in combating smoking and reducing smoking prevalence. This clear anti-nicotine dogmatism and prejudice, which is not based on any scientific evidence since it is not performed through a

critical assessment of the studies, as well as the millions of dollars in funding for this purpose, represents a **clear conflict of interest. The authors of the Vpro-Argos article failed to present their conflict of interest**, and this is **a transparency breach**. Interestingly, they also failed to present their conflict of interest when they contacted me, as seen in my response to them (included as a print screen at the bottom of this letter).

Importantly, the article is full of inaccuracies and false claims about me, and the authors intentionally omitted critical information that they were aware of through our email exchange. For this purpose, I have attached in this document (as a print screen) my response to the questions posed by Mrs. Eva Schram. In my response, you can find all the information I provided to her. The article title refers to “maneuvers of the tobacco industry”, and presents my work without CLEARLY mentioning that **I have never been funded for any research activity** by the tobacco industry. It is **clearly defamatory** to refer to my work in an article with this title. Also, the authors **intentionally omitted** to mention that I do not receive any salary, remuneration or even any material from the Laboratory of the University of Patras that Prof Poulas is directing. This is clearly mentioned in my response and could have been independently verified by the authors. Therefore, I have **no conflict of interest** to report relevant to the Laboratory of the University of Patras. They also discuss about funding that was provided to my **previous affiliation** to cover the cost for research, but they **intentionally omitted** that it happened in 2013 and neither myself nor any other researcher received any financial or other compensation (as clearly mentioned in my response to Mrs. Schram). Furthermore, the authors refer to remuneration that I have supposedly received from AEMSA (an officially non-profit association, 501(c)(6) status by the IRS) for my presence as an expert in meetings with the FDA. This is **false and clear misinformation**, I was never compensated or received any fees for these meetings, and I was present in that meeting as an independent scientist and not as a representative of AEMSA or anyone else. AEMSA funded one study in 2013, which resulted in two publications. In both

publications (in 2014 and 2015), the funding source is clearly and transparently mentioned (<https://www.nature.com/articles/srep04133> and <https://www.nature.com/articles/srep11269>). All my letters and arguments towards regulators are presented in the article as being motivated by incentives from the tobacco or e-cigarette industry, which is **false and clearly defamatory**. My work with Clive Bates was not funded or organized by anyone. It was a cooperation between the two of us, with no sponsorship, no incentives and no organizational support from anyone. Therefore, this is another **defamatory statement** presented in the Vpro-Argos article. The authors of the Vpro-Argos article present me as a consultant and activist. I have never worked as a consultant and never embraced/adhered to an activist stance.

Additionally, all my conflicts of interest statements are transparent and accurate, unlike the false claims made by the authors about supposedly undeclared conflicts. I always follow the declaration of conflicts guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors and any other guidance specifically provided by the journals where I publish my studies. Consequently, all relevant statements in the Vpro-Argos article are **false and clearly defamatory**.

All my work concerning nicotine and COVID-19 refers to pharmaceutical nicotine products, not to tobacco cigarettes, e-cigarettes, heated tobacco products, snus or any other smoking alternative. There is not a single word mentioned in any of my publications about any other product besides pharmaceutical products (nicotine or other medications that act on nicotinic acetylcholine receptors). None of my studies was funded by any tobacco, e-cigarette, or pharmaceutical industry. The authors' position that this work provides support for alternative-to-smoking products is **irrational, insulting and clearly defamatory**.

Finally, the authors suggest that I may have been involved in an effort to create a center of excellence funded by the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World through a grant to the Patras Science Park. I have no affiliation, cooperation or any other engagement relevant to the Science Park. I was never involved in any plans to create a center for excellence. This statement is not only **clearly defamatory and insulting**, but it

also **raises serious questions about the ethics of the authors and of Vpro-Argos** who publicly make such **unsubstantiated claims**.

In conclusion, the article published by Vpro-Argos is **insulting, intentionally defamatory, and damaging** for my personal and scientific integrity and ethics because:

1. It falsely presents myself and my work in an article discussing about tobacco industry tactics while none of my research work was ever funded by the tobacco industry.
2. It falsely presents me as being remunerated for meetings with US regulators and as representing others in these meetings.
3. It falsely presents me as a consultant and activist for the e-cigarette industry.
4. It falsely presents my scientific work and my science-based letters and arguments towards regulators as being motivated by incentives from the tobacco or e-cigarette industry.
5. It falsely presents conflicts relevant to the Laboratory at the University of Patras which do not exist because I have not received any salary, other remuneration or any material from the laboratory.
6. It falsely suggests that I should have presented different conflicts of interests in my studies, a clearly defamatory suggestion.
7. It falsely suggests that my studies concerning nicotine and COVID-19 are linked to tobacco products or e-cigarettes, while all my studies refer to pharmaceutical products only.
8. It falsely presents me as having links with the Patras Science Park and having plans to create a center of excellence funded by the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World.
9. The authors of the article have hidden their own conflicts of interest and have not declared their funding from well-known anti-nicotine crusaders, whose work involves ad hominem attacks against

scientists without having any objections or presenting a critical judgment for the content of their research.

For these reasons, **I demand:**

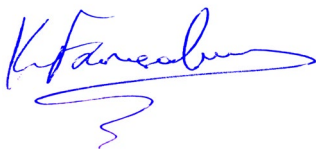
1. The immediate removal of all statements referring to my name from the article. All of them are defamatory.
2. The issue of an apology for all the inaccurate statements made for me, through a retraction note that will be clearly visible to all readers.
3. The clear presentation of the conflicts of interest for all authors of the Vpro-Argos article.

I reserve the right to seek legal advice and initiate legal action against Vpro-Argos and each author separately for this article, which is **intentionally defamatory, false, misleading, and has caused damage to my reputation and my personal and scientific integrity.**

Below (next page) is my response to Mrs. Eva Schram, as a print screen, which represents undisputed proof that the authors of the Vpro-Argos article had crucial information which they failed to disclose. Therefore, all their actions were **intentionally defamatory** and it remains unclear if and to what extent they were motivated by their funding from the University of Bath (i.e., Bloomberg), **which is a clear but undeclared conflict of interest.** I clarify that this letter will be immediately released publicly.

With respect

Konstantinos Farsalinos, MD, MPH



Fwd: please check this email for Farsalinos

Konstantinos Farsalinos <kfarsalinos@gmail.com>

Sat, Nov 21, 2020 at 1:11 AM

To: Eva Schram <esschram@gmail.com>

Dear Mrs Schraam,
Thank you for your email.

1. According to ICMJE, conflicts of interest for the past 3 years should be reported. I have no conflict of interest to report for the past 3 years (and many more).

Onassis Cardiac Surgery Center received payment from Nobacco for the cost of clinical tests (echocardiograms) that were performed in 2013 as part of a study which was presented in a conference 1 or 2 years later (I can't remember exactly, it's been so many years since that happened). No compensation or payment was received by any of the researchers for that study, neither from the company nor from the hospital. I am no longer affiliated with the Onassis Cardiac Surgery Center. None of my studies after that was funded or supported by Nobacco.

I have not participated in any study funded by any tobacco or e-cigarette company as a research associate at the University of Patras. Also, I do not know if the laboratory has agreements and receives funding from Nobacco or any other e-cigarette company, from pharmaceutical companies or from anyone else. I am not the director of the laboratory and I am not involved in funding agreements with commercial entities. I repeat, I have never participated in any project funded by a commercial entity. I am responsible for, and I am coordinating the e-cigarette protocols in which I am the principal investigator (that is why in the vast majority of my publications I am the leading author).

All my studies represent my own findings and my own views, they do not represent the views of the laboratory and, I repeat, they were not funded by commercial entities. I do not receive a salary from the laboratory. I have received payments from the university for projects that were funded by the European Union and by Greek national funds (Ministry of Education).

Therefore, I cannot provide you with any information about agreements between the laboratory and commercial entities (because I don't have any such information) and I cannot declare funding and activities that I am not aware of. The Onassis funding was declared because I knew about it. Finally, presenting the laboratory of the university of Patras as one of my affiliations does not mean that all my studies are performed there.

As for the work on nicotinic cholinergic system and COVID-19, this is entirely my own work which was initiated in March (<https://www.qeios.com/read/Z69O8A.2>). This work has expanded in April with the recruitment of several scientists, including the director of the Laboratory Prof. Poulas. This was because Prof Poulas is a well-known expert in nicotinic cholinergic receptors. His PhD was on nicotinic cholinergic receptors, and that was before e-cigarettes were invented. The same applies for some other co-authors.

All the work concerning the nicotinic cholinergic system and COVID-19 is being performed without any funding. By the way, this work has nothing to do with e-cigarettes, tobacco harm reduction or any nicotine alternatives. We do not even mention the words e-cigarettes or harm reduction in any of our publications. We only talk about PHARMACEUTICAL nicotine products (patches, gums, etc) as well as other approved medications which act on the nicotinic cholinergic receptors. In fact, I am surprised that you are asking about irrelevant (supposed) conflicts but you did not express any interest in knowing if we have any conflict of interest with pharmaceutical companies. That would provide some meaning and content to the terms "balanced" and "fair" that are your intentions, as you claim.

I feel obliged to declare that we have not received any financial or other support from pharmaceutical companies involved in the production of medicinal nicotine products or other medications that act on nicotinic cholinergic receptors, although we did approach one pharmaceutical company to discuss about funding to perform a research project we have designed for their pharmaceutical product (in relation to COVID-19 and the nicotinic cholinergic system).

You are doing nothing more than witch-hunting. I am now used to it, since I have been the recipient of repeated similar attempts to implement censorship because some people do not like my work but can find nothing wrong with it (no manipulation, no malpractice, no data fabrication and falsification). Usually such attempts are funded by the Bloomberg foundation, a well-known biased and discriminatory organization (that is my personal view, based on my experience) that has an impressive record of ad hominem attacks with distortion of truth and science and imaginative and implied conflicts, in order to support their own biased, conflicted and unsubstantiated views. You have not declared your funding source, but this is irrelevant. I am not willing to participate in this "game". I am just happy that you (as many others) have found no issues with the scientific content of my work. In fact our work has been verified, with even more impressive results, by various groups throughout the world. Perhaps you should ask the scientists from the University of Oxford, who published a large study in the journal Heart (<https://heart.bmj.com/content/106/19/1503>) and reported an 88% lower risk for heavy smokers to be admitted to an ICU for COVID, if they were funded by any tobacco company. I can provide you with a list of scientific groups who have verified our findings. You may also ask the French scientists, who have launched clinical trials using pharmaceutical nicotine patches in COVID-19 patients, if they were paid by tobacco or e-cigarette companies (<https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT04598594>; <https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT04583410>).

I kindly ask you to allow me to continue my scientific work instead of wasting my time in witch-hunting. This is all I had to say, and I can reassure you that I do not have any false expectations that my position will be presented in a fair and balanced way in your articles. My past experience has taught me a lot about such attempts. I am a physician, and none will challenge my science ethics. I hope this is made clear. I do not want to participate in any further discussions that are inappropriate and insulting.

Thank you for your patience.

Thank you

Konstantinos Farsalinos, MD, MPH
Adjunct Professor
King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia
Senior Researcher
University of Patras, Greece
School of Public Health, University of West Attica, Greece
Web of Science Highly Cited Researcher 2019
Tel nr: +30 6977 45 48 37
Website: <http://www.ecigarette-research.org>