



To: Andrea Brunais, HSC News Service brunaisa@wvuh.com

CC: Kimberly Horn, Director, Translational Tobacco Reduction Research Program
khorn@hsc.wvu.edu

James Brick, Interim Dean of the School of Medicine jbrick@hsc.wvu.edu

Dear Ms. Brunais et al.:

I am writing to you as the listed contact person for the press release described herein. If you are not responsible for the decision to release this information, I would appreciate it if you could forward this to the appropriate parties.

I am writing to express my concern about a barrage of popular press articles that related to a forthcoming article in the West Virginia Medical Journal, regarding the use of smokeless tobacco. The article will apparently be authored by Robert H. Anderson, at your university, though I do not know this for certain, nor do I know the title of the article. The reason for that is that it is not yet published in the scientific literature, despite having been released by you to the media, apparently for purposes of generating sensationalistic headlines.

For the last week, my colleagues and I have been trying to respond to news stories that make a number of erroneous claims that are attributed to that article. The large number of such stories makes it quite clear that you actively pushed this article into the press before it was published. However, since that article is not actually available to the scientific community we really have no idea if the errors were in the original publication or if reporters were misinterpreting the information they received. We intend to respond to the published article with a letter to the editor or any other appropriate scientific and academic response. But your actions appear intended to circumvent proper scientific and academic dialog; by the time anyone has a chance to review the science, there will already be hundreds of error-filled stories circulating.

I initially contacted the journal about this, thinking that they had contributed to this inappropriate action, but they emphatically denied doing so. In fact, they explicitly told me that they had not authorized the authors to make any statements regarding publication of their material in that journal, and that it is their policy to not make any content available to the press prior to publication.

There is an embarrassing tendency in the health sciences to put out information to the popular press before it can be reviewed by the scientific community. Every time it happens, it sends the signal "we do not think our research will stand up to serious scientific scrutiny, but we expect we can fool the naïve public with it."



Most often the inappropriate press releases takes the form of preliminary results that have perhaps been presented at a conference, and does not include the implicit credibility granted by reference to a (yet-unpublished and thus not available for critical review) journal article. In the present situation you have co-opted the credibility of a journal, against that journal's own policy, to create a storm of popular press without allowing the scientific community to review what you have published. There seems to be more interest in generating sensational headlines than producing good science for careful consideration. I find this a very sad state of affairs, and I hope this is not the policy of your University (which, on a personal note, would be particularly disappointing for me: WV is my family's home state and WVU as it is my mother's alma mater, and this is the only health science story I have seen come out of WVU for as long as I can remember; I would like to think you can do better than inaccurate claims and pop press sensationalism).

In the interests of disclosure, I will note that we are likely to write about this incident as part of our research on the ethics of how health science is conducted and reported. If you or anyone involved would care to provide a comment or explanation about what occurred, we will give it appropriate acknowledgment in what we write.

Sincerely,

Carl V. Phillips
Associate Professor
University of Alberta School of Public Health