

News and Notes

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TOBACCO SCIENTIST WINS CASE AGAINST ILLEGAL SACKING

Tobacco industry influence has until recently been strong in French politics; but perhaps this will change with the new government. The Sarkozy government presided over an increase in prevalence from 27% in 2005 to 29% in 2010 – at a time when prevalence has been declining in major western countries. This will lead to many thousands of avoidable deaths. But in May 2012 scientists fighting to protect lives against this onslaught won a small but important victory.

By way of background, in November 2009, Gérard Dubois, a professor of public health at Amiens University Hospital, was sued for libel by the French tobaccoists' union because he stated on television that cigarettes kill two smokers each year for every tobaccoist in the country [1]. His university declined to support him, but thankfully the 'Comité National Contre le Tabagisme' a non-governmental organisation took up his case. The French tobaccoists lost but not until after they had taken the case before the Court of Appeal which upheld the original decision in November 2011. Soon after the start of this attempt to prevent public health scientists from speaking the truth, in December 2009 Alain Brailon, a tenured senior consultant in Professor Dubois' unit, was removed from his post by the hospital board. The Ministry of Health enforced the sacking against the advice of the National Statutory Committee [1, 2]. Now,

in May this year, the Paris Administrative Court has ordered the sacking to be cancelled on the grounds that it was illegal.

It is worth remembering in all this that public health scientists do their work out of a deep concern for their fellow humans, and are willing to expose themselves to stress and hardship in support of these values. By contrast, the tobacco industry continues to demonstrate how little the suffering of smokers and their families mean when it comes to the quest for profit. Hopefully this episode will remind public bodies in France and elsewhere where their responsibility lies.

References:

1. Dubois G. Abuse of libel laws and a sacking: The gagging of public health experts in France. *Tobacco Control Blog* November 8th, 2010. Available at <http://blogs.bmj.com/tc/2010/11/08/>
2. Lee S. S. The power of one and saving private Brailon. *Liver Int* 2012; 32: 1.

