The BMJ has uncovered links between companies, campaign groups and individuals lobbying for wider patient access to cannabis for medical use and a parallel campaign to create a lucrative recreational market for the drug in the UK. The first article focused on the links between commercial organisations that are seeking new markets for recreational cannabis and patient groups and researchers. Here, we look at the involvement of the tobacco industry in funding research into medicinal cannabis, and the complex web of connections linked to both medicinal and recreational use of cannabis.

Gavin Sathianathan is typical of the new breed of cannabis entrepreneur. The 41 year old is founder and main shareholder of Alta Flora, a private limited London based company, incorporated in May 2018, specialising in “wellness products from natural sources.” He is also a trustee of the United Patients Alliance (UPA), a patient led medical cannabis support group founded in 2014 to “safeguard the patients’ voice in advancing legal access to cannabis therapeutics.” The alliance is also supporting Project Twenty21, which aims to recruit and prescribe cannabis to 20 000 patients to create “the largest body of evidence for the effectiveness and tolerability of medical cannabis … to demonstrate to policymakers that medical cannabis should be as widely available, and affordable, as other approved medicines.”

Another of Sathianathan’s recent roles was as chief executive of Forma Holdings, a cannabis investment fund launched in 2016 with offices in London and Los Angeles. Together with Neil Mahapatra, a contact from his student days at Harvard who is a managing partner at London based private equity and venture capital firm Kingsley Capital Partners, Sathianathan is also a co-founder and director of Oxford Cannabinoid Technologies.

In 2017 Kingsley announced that it was founding Oxford Cannabinoid Technologies and, in collaboration with Oxford University, investing up to £10m (€11m; $13m) in a “ground-breaking cannabinoid biomedicine research programme... to investigate the role of cannabinoids in biology and medicine” and develop “safe and effective prescription medicines to treat serious and life-threatening human diseases and conditions,” including cancer, pain, neurological conditions, and autoimmune and autoinflammatory diseases.

But in June 2018 Oxford Cannabinoid Technologies announced it had attracted total additional funding of about $10m from two potentially controversial sources with investment interests that are not limited to the medicinal cannabis market.

One was Casa Verde Capital, a US venture capital firm co-founded in 2015 by Snoop Dogg, the US rap artist and high profile exponent of recreational cannabis use. Casa Verde is focused exclusively on cannabis which, it believes, “will be among the most compelling investment themes of our generation.”

The identity of the other investor—tobacco company Imperial Brands (formerly Imperial Tobacco)—will ring alarm bells in the public health community. In a press release in July 2018 announcing it was taking an equity stake in Oxford Cannabinoid Technologies, Imperial’s chief development officer, Matthew Phillips, said cannabinoid products had “significant potential and our investment enables Imperial to support OCT’s important research while building a deeper understanding of the medical cannabis market.”

Recreational market

Asked by The BMJ whether it had any plans to invest in any future recreational cannabis market in the UK, a spokesperson for Imperial dismissed this as “a hypothetical question.” He added: “Recreational cannabis is not legal in the UK and we have no plans. Any potential for changes to its legal status is a matter for the government, and we don’t have a view on this.”

A spokesperson for Oxford Cannabinoid Technologies told The BMJ that the company “would not look to enter the recreational market” should restrictions in the UK be eased. But he added: “It is worth noting that while neither [co-founder] Neil
Mahapatra nor OCT advocate in support of recreational cannabis ... Kingsley Capital Partners has founded other businesses that are active in the cannabinoid market.”

These businesses include Equinox International, and “in the event that the UK were to decide to promote recreational cannabis legislation, it is likely that Equinox would look to take advantage of this commercial opportunity.”

Asked whether Mahapatra considered Imperial an appropriate partner for a company operating in the healthcare market, the spokesperson said “this is a question best asked of Imperial [which] took a small stake in OCT in order better to understand the molecular mechanisms of cannabinoids.” Imperial’s investment, he added, was “modest and represents a small percentage of the total value of OCT.”

However, in an interview in the Times newspaper in 2018 Mahapatra dismissed criticism of a healthcare company accepting money from a tobacco firm. “From my perspective,” he was quoted as saying, “any money that’s not going into developing cigarettes and is going into good things, such as research that could help people, is great.” The medical arguments for cannabis, he added, were “overwhelming or, at least, have the potential to be overwhelming.” He added he was “50/50” on whether cannabis should be legalised for recreational use.

A spokesperson for Oxford University confirmed its collaboration with Kingsley Capital Partners and Oxford Cannabinoid Technologies but declined to comment on whether it considered Casa Verde Capital and Imperial Tobacco to be appropriate partners in a research programme investigating the role of cannabinoids in medicine.

Marta Di Forti, a psychiatrist at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience at King’s College London, who last year published research on the relation between cannabis use and psychotic disorder,* called for more independent funding for cannabis research.

“It is always very dangerous to forget history and we are now seeing the sort of connections that we have seen happening before,” she said—and the involvement of tobacco company Imperial was “dreadful and shocking.”

“We are lacking in funding for cannabis research from independent organisations such as the Wellcome Trust or the Medical Research Council. The result will be that more and more you are going to see even prestigious and reputable academic institutions accepting money from some of these companies.”

Competing interests: I have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

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