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Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Secretary of State for Health
Department of Health
Richmond House
79 Whitehall
London SW1A 2NS



8th November 2012

Dear Mr Hunt

I was dismayed to discover that Stephen Williams MP has used his privileged position within parliament to circulate a very serious allegation about our campaign against standardised (plain) packaging of tobacco products.

The allegation is featured in the APPG on Smoking and Health 'Political Bulletin' (enclosed) which I understand has been sent to every MP including you. A deeply misleading headline reads: 'FOI request shows Industry Campaigners Rigging Plain Packs Petition'.

The report then states that, "Tobacco industry campaigners running a petition against plain packaging cheated to boost their results, as revealed in documents published after a Freedom of Information request to the Department of Health".

The facts are as follows. In response to the public consultation on standardised packaging of tobacco, the Hands Off Our Packs campaign (which is run by the smokers' lobby group Forest) submitted to the Department of Health the names of 235,000 people who are opposed to plain packaging. (In total we understand that approximately half a million people have signed petitions against the measure.)

In two letters to Forest director Simon Clark, dated 14 and 20 June, Tobacco Programme Manager at the Department of Health, outlined four complaints that the Department of Health had received about our campaign. At least two of these complaints were made by people working in or closely associated with Tobacco Control. One complainant is a trustee of Action on Smoking and Health (ASH).

A fifth complaint was made by himself and it is this complaint that inspired the APPG on Smoking and Health headline.

In his letter of 20 June also asked a series of questions about our campaign – how was it conducted, by whom, what payment arrangements were in place, which geographical areas were covered etc.

Cont/...



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We investigated each complaint and provided a full and comprehensive answer to every one of _____ questions. A copy of the correspondence is attached. As you will see, there is no justification whatsoever for the deliberately misleading headline 'Industry Campaigners Rigging Plain Packs Petition' which implies, without a shred of evidence, serious abuse of the petition process.

It is disappointing that any parliamentarian would allow misleading allegations to be circulated in his or her name without verifying the facts or putting them in their broader context. The tabloid-style headline and selective reporting of this matter does neither Mr Williams nor parliament any credit.

In view of this we seek your firm assurance that decisions made on standardised packaging of tobacco products will not be influenced in any way by the selective 'reporting' of this matter by Stephen Williams MP and the campaign group ASH via and the APPG on Smoking and Health.

We also seek assurance that the Department of Health has adopted and will maintain a policy of even-handedness throughout this process. The Department has been most rigorous in its investigation of our campaign. We trust that has been matched by an equally rigorous investigation into the activities of those campaigns that support standardised packaging.

We know that the Department of Health is aware of a serious attempt by some individuals within UK Centre for Tobacco Control Studies (UKCTCS) to deliberately overstate support for plain packaging by encouraging multiple sign ups during the period 23 July to 10 August 10 (see attached). We hope that this and any other issues that the Department are aware of have been investigated with equal vigour.

The public is entitled to expect that the review of the consultation will be even-handed in how the respective campaigns are treated and reported. I ask you to confirm that this will be the case.

Finally, for your information, I enclose a further letter that was sent to _____ by Forest director Simon Clark on 7 September highlighting some of the concerns we have about the pro-plain packaging campaign.

I would be grateful if your office would confirm receipt of this letter and I look forward to receiving your reply in due course.

Yours sincerely



Angela Harbutt
Hands Off Our Packs

Copied to:
Norman Lamb MP, Department of Health, Minister of State
Una O'Brien, Department of Health, Permanent Secretary