

The imperative to counter fossil fuel industry disinformation for public health



As the Los Angeles fires scorched communities and choked the skies, the destructive forces of climate-driven disasters became hard to deny. Yet, amidst the devastation—scorched neighbourhoods, overwhelmed hospitals,¹ toxic air,² and mounting public health risks—a torrent of disinformation³ spread, deflecting attention from the root cause of these escalating events. Fossil fuel interests seem to have been actively spreading doubt about the role their industries play in intensifying extreme weather⁴ by pushing misleading narratives and downplaying the link between fossil fuel emissions and climate change.

Disinformation campaigns are life-threatening and pose a grave danger to both public health and the global climate. The tactics used mirror those used by the tobacco industry, which, for decades, spread doubt about the harmful effects of smoking. By funding pseudo-scientific research and influencing policy makers, the fossil fuel industry seeks to delay the transition to sustainable energy, perpetuating reliance on fossil fuels despite knowing that doing so is likely to translate to loss of lives and suffering across entire communities. Disinformation campaigns surrounding the Los Angeles fires are the latest examples of how fossil fuel interests manipulate discourse to avoid accountability, making the imperative to counter this deceit a matter of both climate justice and public health protection.

In addition to the impacts of global warming, every step of the fossil fuel lifecycle causes health harms—from the point of extraction to waste disposal and clean up. Communities near extraction sites face increased risks of respiratory diseases, cancers, reproductive harm, and adverse birth outcomes, and workers face serious occupational hazards.⁵ Transportation and waste disposal, as with fracking, contaminate water and air, worsening public health through exposure to harmful chemicals.⁶ Fossil fuel combustion worsens air quality and accelerates climate change, causing millions of deaths annually from conditions such as heart disease, lung cancer, and respiratory illnesses.⁵ Additionally, urban wildfires, such as those in Los Angeles, release petrochemicals from burning furniture, household goods, and cars, causing spikes in the levels of toxic air pollutants, such as lead, chlorine, benzene, and formaldehyde. The 2018 wildfire in Paradise,

CA, led to dangerously high benzene levels in tap water, potentially increasing the risk of childhood blood disorders.⁷

Despite claims of being climate solution leaders, fossil fuel companies continue to spend billions on lobbying and disinformation to delay meaningful climate action.⁸ The medical and public health community is uniquely positioned at the forefront of the battle against fossil fuel disinformation, and their role has never been more crucial. As some of the most trusted voices in society, health professionals hold a powerful influence over public opinion and policy, making them essential advocates for truth and health. However, the growing tide of fossil fuel industry disinformation, aimed at confusing the public, deflecting responsibility, and delaying action, threatens to erode the foundation of this trust and the ability of the health community to advocate on climate-related health threats. Therefore, it is imperative for health professionals to take a proactive, united stand in countering this influence.

The public health community's fight against the tobacco industry provides crucial lessons for confronting fossil fuel disinformation. Just as the tobacco industry manipulated science and public opinion to downplay the dangers of smoking, the fossil fuel industry uses similar tactics to cast doubt on climate change and hinder progress.⁹ The victory over tobacco was achieved through scientific integrity, legal action, public awareness campaigns, and strong regulation¹⁰—strategies that can serve as a blueprint for addressing fossil fuel disinformation. Health professionals should leverage their unique power and apply these lessons to the climate crisis by promoting evidence-based policies, ensuring transparency in research, and educating the public on the health risks of fossil fuels. Legal actions, such as the polluter pays principle, can hold the industry accountable. Public awareness campaigns that highlight the immediate health benefits of reducing fossil fuel consumption—such as improved air quality and lower health-care costs—can counter the industry's economic arguments and build support for cleaner energy. Additionally, promoting renewable energy solutions can provide much-needed energy access in areas without reliable energy, further reinforcing the case for a

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transition to cleaner, sustainable energy sources. The health benefits of meeting the Paris Agreement targets could save millions of lives and trillions of dollars in health-care costs by midcentury.¹¹ To protect public health and drive climate action, keeping fossil fuel interests out of policy discussions is essential. By adopting strategies from the tobacco fight,¹² including stricter regulations on lobbying and stronger conflict-of-interest policies, the public health community can challenge the fossil fuel industry's influence.

The fossil fuel industry, like the tobacco industry before it, shows a dismaying proclivity to prioritise profits over public health. Its disinformation campaigns have delayed action on climate change and exacerbated the health impacts of fossil fuel pollution. The stakes are high, but the lessons from the past offer a clear path forward: transparency, accountability, and unwavering commitment to public health are key to overcoming the disinformation and securing a healthier and just future.

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