

## **The commercial interests driving cancer deaths**

*By Dr Cary Adams, CEO of the Union for International Cancer Control*

Some 10 million people died of cancer in 2020, making this disease a leading cause of death worldwide. There are ways to prevent a significant percentage of these deaths. In particular, smoking, alcohol consumption, and high body mass index, unhealthy diet and lack of physical exercise contribute to [one-third annual cancer-related deaths](#). By acting on these modifiable risk factors, the number of lives that would be saved is staggering.

Unfortunately, unhealthy products such as tobacco, alcohol and ultra-processed foods are too readily available in many countries and heavily marketed by companies who interfere in policy debates and misuse science for commercial interest. This undermines the ability for many individuals to make informed decisions about their health.

[As highlighted in a 2020 report](#) by the Non-Communicable Diseases Alliance (NCDA), many companies even leveraged the COVID-19 pandemic to pursue these aggressive strategies in the form of corporate whitewashing.

For example, McDonald's in the US [provided free "thank you meals"](#) to first responders. In Russia, Heineken [donated meals to health workers working nights](#) – as well as its energy drink Solar Power. And 50 ventilators were donated to hospitals in Greece – [by Philip Morris International](#), whose products ironically contribute to the development of respiratory disease and lung cancer.

Furthermore, companies often target populations that are already more vulnerable due to ethnicity, geographical location or low socio-economic background [and more likely](#) to experience adverse health outcomes, including higher cancer incidence and lower survival rates. In the US, for instance, ads for menthol cigarettes – [which lead to heavier smoking](#) as the menthol masks the taste of cigarette smoke – specifically targeted African Americans to the point where [85% of Black adults who smoke use menthols](#).

Many alcohol, tobacco and ultra-processed food companies target youth, to capture a new generation with their harmful and often addictive products. For decades, Tony the Tiger, Ronald McDonald the Clown and Joe Camel were well-known child-friendly brand mascots respectively sugary cereal, fast food and cigarettes. Research in XXXX in the USA has shown that [young people ages 11 to 14 saw an average of three alcohol ads per day](#) (with higher rates for African American and Hispanic youths). And in 2022, [Coca Cola partnered with Panini](#), the official licensed sticker album of the World Cup – when Panini's target audience is 6-12-year-olds.

Given the growing burden of cancer globally, UICC is calling upon governments this [World Cancer Day](#) on 4 February to implement sensible regulatory measures to limit people's exposure to unhealthy and carcinogenic products.

In particular, UICC recommends four policy actions that have proved effective in reducing the availability and consumption of unhealthy products: increased taxation, restricted advertising, improved labelling and effective public education.

Together, we can close the care gap.

*About the Union for International Cancer Control*

The Union for International Cancer Control (UICC) is the largest and oldest membership organisation aiming to unite and support the cancer community, in order to reduce the global

cancer burden, to promote greater equity, and to ensure that cancer control continues to be a priority in the world health and development agenda.