

BRIEF REPORT

“It is possible he is a kind of nut”*: how the tobacco industry quietly promoted Dr William Whitby

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Dr William Whitby was a general practitioner in Sydney who, from 1978 until about 1987, self published two books extolling the virtues of smoking and ridiculing anti-smoking claims. Privately the tobacco industry regarded him as “nutty”, while nonetheless believing that his views should be promoted. They quietly supported him by distributing his book, offering legal advice, and persuading him to take media training. Many Australians would have been exposed to his views.

One of the more memorable characters in the Australian tobacco control landscape in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s was Dr William Whitby, a pipe smoking lawyer and medical practitioner with a general practice in suburban Sydney. In the mid 1970s Whitby began writing letters to newspapers denouncing the “smoking scare” and in 1978 self published a small book titled *Smoking is good for you*.¹ He followed this up in 1986 with a second volume titled *The smoking scare de-bunked*² (fig 1). In 1979, he also publicised his offer of a A\$10 000 reward “for proof of smoking harm” and his claim that because no one had taken up the offer, his views were obviously correct.^{3–5} Whitby set his definition of proof so that his wager would remain inviolate. Following prominent publicity in Australia about the heavy smoking British Princess Margaret’s “cancer scare” in March 1985, Whitby gained some press publicity by sending her his book and congratulating her for ignoring advice to stop smoking.⁶

The flavour of Whitby’s arguments can be gleaned from the following excerpts from his second book²:

“The eminent Professor Schrauzer, University of California, President of the International Association of Bio-inorganic Chemists, testified before a US congressional committee in 1982 that it has long been well known to scientists that certain constituents of tobacco smoke act as anticarcinogens (anti-cancer agents) in test animals. He said that when known carcinogens (cancer causing substances) are applied to the animals the application of constituents of cigarette smoke counters them. He testified that no ingredient of cigarette smoke has been shown to cause human lung cancer and also that no one has been able to produce lung cancer in laboratory animals from smoking.” (p 30)

“A philosophical patient said to me the other day since I took up smoking I have been so well that I think if

everybody smoked they would be so healthy the doctors would go broke. It is why they are against it?” (p 35)

“A number of investigations showed that smokers get less lung cancer than non-smokers—in some studies only half.” (p 103)

“We have seen the whole campaign is really an attack on smokers by smoking haters under the guise of a nonexistent health danger—with not a shred of proof that smoking causes lung cancer or any other disease.” (p 115)

INDUSTRY AMBIVALENCE

The industry documents display a consistent ambivalence about Whitby: those who had met him found him an extremist with potential to be a loose cannon who might discredit the industry by association. They consistently noted that the industry should not openly associate with him. However, they were unanimous in their view that he was good news for the industry, presumably because of the importance of having doctors being seen to dissent actively from the mainstream of medical opinion against smoking. However, they believed that behind-the-scenes efforts should be made to encourage him and promote his views. This duplicitous strategy presumably allowed the industry to benefit from any damaging blows Whitby’s publicity efforts could land on claims that smoking was harmful to health, while allowing it to avoid any direct criticism that might arise from his outlandish statements.

In February 1977, a Sydney newspaper ran a feature on Whitby headed “Cigarette danger used as a smokescreen”, accompanied by a photo of him smoking a pipe. Whitby blamed “nuclear blasts and radioactivity” for cancer, explaining that “the public is being hoodwinked by medical men”. He said that, for patients who had been advised to quit smoking and were unable to instead smoke a pipe, “To tell such a patient to give up smoking would be like a death sentence.”⁷

PM AUSTRALIA

In September 1978, PM (Philip Morris) Australia’s Andrew Whist wrote to head office in New York, stating: “we have been lucky enough to develop Australian expertise in this area, presently headed by a Sydney medical practitioner, Dr William Whitby.”⁸ By 1978, PM Australia had embraced Whitby as part of their “Smoking and Health Strategy”⁹ designed to dissemble the medical evidence against smoking, reporting to the PM USA chief executive officer (CEO) that “tobacco representatives briefed Whitby as thoroughly as possible on the key issues and persuaded him to take a crash course in television interviewing techniques... Whitby is now being briefed in greater detail... Our objective in supporting him... is to encourage other doctors to join him in his stand...”

*Note about Dr W Whitby. 17 August 1987. Philip Morris. Bates No. 2024271872. <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/vdl85e00>

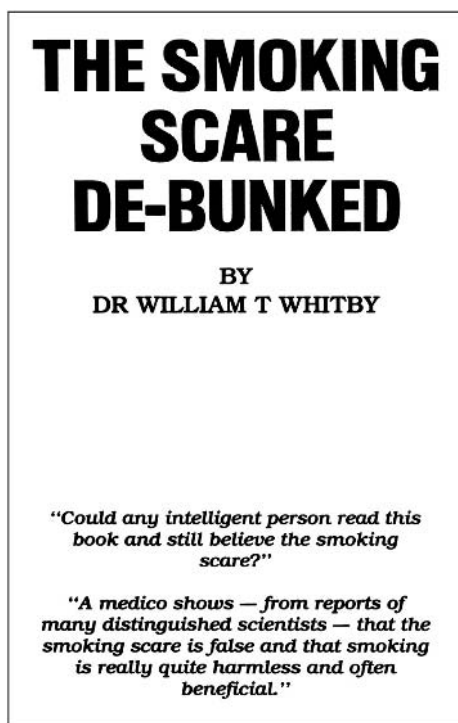


Figure 1 The cover of one of Dr Whitby's books.

Now that a family doctor has emerged who is not afraid to publicly oppose the medical bureaucracy, we will be doing our utmost to persuade others who privately agree with Dr. Whitby to come out and support him.⁹

Whitby began sending copies of his book to international tobacco industry figures.¹⁰ At PM USA the book was internally reviewed for the CEO, describing “Whitby's far-out approach” and noting “Dr. Whitby has co-operated with the industry from time to time. He is well known for espousing a variety of eccentric views and we would suggest that your treat his material with a good deal of caution”.¹¹ The review described his book as “an exaggerated statement against anti-smokers” and said that Whitby “is just as fanatic in defending smoking” as anti-smoking groups were in condemning it.¹² On receipt of the book, an RJ Reynolds official wrote to Whitby: “You are certainly to be congratulated for the courageous campaign on behalf of smokers which you have undertaken... You are certainly an inspiration to the millions of people around the world who enjoy smoking.”¹³ By 1982, RJR was providing advice “to assist the lawyer who is defending Dr. Whitby” in a suit being brought by a German aggrieved at being misquoted in his book.¹⁴

UK INTEREST

In the UK, efforts were made to have the book reviewed as a serious publication. A Carreras Rothmans staffer wrote to the industry's UK Tobacco Advisory Council that he had been showing Whitby's book to “close friends in the trade press”. Enclosing press cuttings “as a result of those contacts” he noted: “I am encouraged enough by the initial reaction to try and stimulate wider publicity.”¹⁵ A meeting of the Public Relations Committee of the UK's Tobacco Advisory Council minutes: “It was agreed that the publicity obtained for this publication [*Smoking is good For you*] in the press and selected journals...had been satisfactory.”¹⁶ An example of this was a totally uncritical review of the book published in a UK trade journal *ABC*.¹⁷

The Secretary General of the International Committee on Smoking Issues (ICOSI), Julian Doyle, noted to the director of the Tobacco Institute of Australia, Brian Simpson, that Whitby had been writing to the various tobacco company CEOs. Doyle wrote: “There is some doubt in my mind as to whether we in ICOSI should make any direct contact with Dr. Whitby as one can never be sure what use he would make of any correspondence.” However, Doyle expressed concern that Whitby was being critical of the industry's “head in the sand” attitude over the smoking and health debate and urged Simpson to contact Whitby to inform him about ICOSI's mission.¹⁸

Simpson replied that Whitby “has been most useful as an independent person moving around Australia proclaiming his views on smoking, and we believe it is to our advantage not to be associated with him. We do however offer some assistance by purchasing his publication and quietly encouraging him through one of the Companies... I have met Dr. Whitby...he is...a little eccentric.”¹⁹

“MEDICAL” JOURNAL PUBLICATION

An index of Whitby's reception was when an article titled *Science and smoking* authored by him was published in *The Australian Surgeon*, a non-peer reviewed magazine circulated to Australian surgeons, in August 1980 with an editor's note explaining that recent correspondence in *The Australian* newspaper between Whitby and other readers had been halted by the editor. The Surgeon's editor stated “Dr. Whitby has an intellectually legitimate point of view, some might even say a valid point of view...[Whitby suggests] that smoking does not cause lung cancer.”²⁰ Perhaps spurred on by this new limelight, he arranged for the book to be translated into Norwegian and Swedish, with German, Dutch, and Portuguese editions being scheduled.²¹ The legitimization accorded by being published in a medical journal excited interest in the industry. Minutes of a meeting of the European Tobacco Manufacturers Associations record: “Mr. [sic] W.T. Whitby...was seeking further publicity in various parts of the world for his book... Mr Whitby's views had received some attention in the ‘Australian Surgeon’ and it was felt that this fact could be exploited. It was generally agreed, however, that the tobacco industry should not be seen to be in any way directly connected with Mr. Whitby's book.”²²

The 1980 edition of the University of London's Professor Hans Eysenck's book *The causes and effects of smoking* referred to Whitby as “an eminent physician and surgeon”, when he was in fact an Australian suburban general practitioner.²³ ID Adams from Campbell-Johnson Limited, part of the public relations firm Hill & Knowlton, noted: “The Australian doctor, Whitby...was in fact an undistinguished medical practitioner who was ‘as nutty as a fruit cake’.”²⁴

PM USA again internally reviewed Whitby's second edition, noting Whitby had become even more bizarre, now claiming that “some of the militant antismokers have signs of mental derangement and could well belong in mental hospitals”, that the members of the World Health Organization could be called “Commies” and that there were now “packs of antismoking thugs attacking smokers in the streets, and their crusade has turned into a hate cult”.⁴ PM Australia's Andrew Whist had reaffirmed that because of Whitby's “extreme right-wing conservatism—and penchant for publicity—PM Australia keeps him at arm's length”.²⁵ Nonetheless, a hand written note on the review by CEO Jim Bowling commented: “I think there is a lot of good stuff in the book.”²⁵ Within the company, a project gathering research material on the benefits of smoking recommended Whitby's first book as a good reference for such material²⁶ while another note refers to it as “the notorious publica-

tion".²⁷ This did not prevent Hamish Maxwell, PM's CEO in 1987, writing to Whitby stating "obviously we appreciate your views and support".²⁸ As late as 1997, PM and British American Tobacco (BAT) still had Whitby's works under active consideration as material to be included in industry submissions—*The smoking scare debunked* appeared in a bibliography of potential resources to be used.²⁹

CONCLUSION

The Whitby story illustrates a flagrant saga of industry duplicity. Senior industry officials from two consecutive CEOs of Philip Morris down were advised that Whitby was as "nutty as a fruit cake".²⁴ Despite this, the industry "quietly encourag[ed] him through one of the companies"¹⁹ and promoted him to journalists as a legitimate and informed voice critical of the evidence that smoking caused disease. His vigorous publicity efforts over some 12 years, discreetly fanned by the industry, would have exposed many Australians and indeed those in other nations to the proposition that some doctors were adamant that smoking was not harmful, but indeed beneficial to health. With someone as prominent as Eysenck stating that Whitby was "eminent", it is not unreasonable to assume that many ordinary members of the public might have formed a similar judgement and not dismissed him as an obvious maverick with no credibility within any respected medical or scientific circles.

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