BRIEF REPORT

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

S Chapman

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. He followed this up in 1986 with a second volume titled The smoking scare de-bunked (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. 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 the scare” in March 1985, Whitby gained some press publicity by sending her his book and congratulating her for ignoring his views. Many Australians would have been exposed to his views.

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

“...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.” (p 30)

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.” By 1978, PM Australia had embraced Whitby as part of their “Smoking and Health Strategy” 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...
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.”

Whitby began sending copies of his book to international tobacco industry figures. 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”. 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. 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.”

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 in fact an Australian suburban general practitioner. 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’.”

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 “Commissaries” and that there were now “packs of antismoking thugs attacking smokers in the streets, and their crusade has turned into a hate cult.” 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”.

Nonetheless, a hand written note on the review by CEO Jim Bowley commented: “I think there is a lot of good stuff in the book.” Within the company, a project gathering research material on the benefits of smoking recommended Whitby's first book as a good reference for such material 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 encouraged” 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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REFERENCES