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 of 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.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 the “smoke scare”. 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.”

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.

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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 disseminate 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...
THE SMOKING SCARE DE-BUNKED

BY DR. WILLIAM T. WHITBY

Could any intelligent person read this book and still believe the smoking scare?

“A medico shows — from reports of many distinguished scientists — that the smoking scare is false and that smoking is really quite harmless and often beneficial.”

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 his views were espoused by a German 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.” 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. The legitimation 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.”

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 “Commissies” 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 Bowling 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”.30 Despite this, the industry “quietly encourag[ed] him through one of the companies”31 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


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