

Urgently needed: Voices for integrity in public policymaking

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Society needs strong voices to promote public health and the integrity of policy-making processes. This is especially critical given the dominant paradigm of market-based solutions and the increasing conversion by transnational corporations of their economic power into political power. Nicky Hager's recent book *Dirty Politics* exposed an apparent systemic approach being used by the tobacco, alcohol and processed food industries in New Zealand to attack prominent public health advocates.¹

Most of the book focused on the close links between right wing blogger, Cameron Slater, and the ruling National Party in orchestrating political attacks and character assassinations using Slater's *Whaleoil* website. That same process was allegedly used by Katherine Rich, CEO of the New Zealand Food and Grocery Council, to denigrate public health advocates. Toxic blogs vilifying people such as Professor Doug Sellman, a distinguished alcohol and addiction expert from New Zealand's National Addiction Centre, were posted on the *Whaleoil* website in Slater's name.

In October 2014, Professor Mike Daube, Director of the Public Health Advocacy Institute of Western Australia and President of the Australian Council on Smoking and Health came under sustained attack with the use of exaggeration, distortion and

fabrication deliberately targeting his credibility. The Slater-style attacks, in this case, started with a sustained effort from a 'shock jock' on a commercial radio station and were then picked up by some mainstream media.

It seems the original Big Tobacco 'handbook of dirty tricks' to undermine public health has been widely adopted and enriched by other 'disease vectors', Big Alcohol and Big Junk Food.

Health Minister, Tony Ryall, ignored all concerns raised by health groups about conflicts of interest when he appointed Rich to the Health Promotion Agency in 2012. Following exposure by Hager of actual conflicts of interest, Ryall simply dismissed a letter from over 30 senior public health experts calling for an investigation into Rich's role in undermining public health while on the HPA Board.

A blanket of suppression is insidiously descending upon the voices for public health. Transnational corporations are pulling down on one side of the blanket to quieten the voices calling for regulation of their products and their behaviours while unfortunately some governments are pulling down on the other side.

There has been an escalation of government efforts to control public health information and messages. A 2006 survey of Australian public health academics documented 142 suppression events among 302 responding academics.² The information suppressed was almost always unfavourable results, mainly in health services delivery and population health status. Methods of suppression included: blocking or delaying publication, sanitising reports, denying data access, and blocking funding. Academic freedom of speech struggles under the suppression blanket at a time when people like Slater are strategically pushing the messages of big business.

Civil servants are appropriately restricted in their day jobs from publically criticising their masters. However, this has spread to other sectors such as doctors in hospitals and scientists in government-funded research institutes. A New Zealand strategic plan for science, released in July 2014,³ proposed a 'code of practice for public engagement' for scientists, which has raised concerns that it will further inhibit scientists' voices.⁴ Politicians on both sides of the Tasman have recently denigrated scientists when they exposed uncomfortable evidence on polluted waterways⁵ and deaths from coalmine fire smoke.⁶

The blanket is also heavily descending upon non-government organisations. The Queensland Government has added a clause restricting criticisms made by bodies receiving more than 50% of their funding from government.⁷ VicHealth and Healthways have been champions of public health advocacy for decades in Australia. But they are now at high risk of buckling to political pressures not to engage in or fund public health advocacy. The political mantra is that government money should not fund organisations to advocate back to it. In reality, it is taxpayers' money funding the voices to advocate on the public's behalf and better public policy results when these voices are supported.

The warning bells should be ringing for public health. Tactics from government and vested commercial interests range from subtle to brutal, from blogs to contracts, and from chill to denigration. It is not time to allow these to go unnoticed and unchallenged. They diminish the foundations of science, democracy and freedoms of speech that our society depends upon.

Voices and actions are needed from public health scientists and practitioners, including:

- Building the active membership to strengthen existing population health organisations
- Building active coalitions of individuals and organisations
- Ensuring that public health positions are based on sound evidence and ethics
- Taking personal and group action such as speaking up, writing to MPs, responding on blogs and in newspapers
- Challenging governments that try to gag advocacy activities of community groups, scientists, and health professionals
- Protecting freedoms of speech as far as possible in personal contracts
- Being vigilant in exposing conflicts of interest in policy-making processes, within government advisory or governance structures, and in the voices which oppose sound, evidence-informed public policy

Strong public health invariably means being effective politically. And politics which is dominated by the interests of big business invariably means weak public health. It is time to reclaim the integrity and strength in public health which is being rapidly eroded. We urgently need many more voices and actions on behalf of the public's health.

References

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