

Wrestling with 'doubt-sayers': a first step in leading community-wide climate change action for better health

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With the obvious exception of Aboriginal peoples, Australians have never been healthier.¹ Our lifestyles, living conditions and health services are among the best in the world. However, there is a real and escalating threat to our health as the global ecosystem – our life support system – is increasingly at risk through the negative impacts of climate change.² This paper is a call to action for those involved in promoting and protecting Australia's health, imploring all to join the fray and constructively address this most fundamental determinant of health.

This call to action has been prompted by my recalling the 'five eras of health promotion' of my 1991 historical review, where I predicted the forthcoming fifth era should reflect the World Health Day 1990 slogan: "Our planet: our health". I concluded: "... health, environment and lifestyles are inextricably linked at a global level ... only in a healthy ecosystem can human beings continue to live and thrive".³ Following publication, many colleagues, both Australian and international, communicated their agreement with me.

Yet, although concern about the global ecosystem seemed high on the priorities of health promoters two decades ago, we have made little progress. The evidence that the environment is increasingly unhealthy has mounted incontrovertibly and as good health promoters, we are obligated to work from such a strengthening evidence base. Why then are there so many obstacles that suppress and restrict appropriate action on making our environment as healthy as possible to optimise human health? Why is there so

much power wielded by those pushing views that are based on little or no evidence?

Questioning this irregularity provided a feeling of *déjà vu* – we had been there before when we learnt of the ground-breaking work of Doll and Hill in 1954 on the life-threatening effect of tobacco smoking,⁴ and subsequently studied the longitudinal studies of the same team, providing confirmatory evidence of the morbidity and mortality associated with this extraordinarily hazardous human behaviour.⁵ Thanks to the investigative work of dedicated tobacco control advocates, we have realised the extent to which the tobacco companies with their vested interests have manipulated dissemination of the science and raised unsubstantiated doubt.⁶ The revenue-generating passion of the tobacco corporations which resulted in campaigns to keep the doubt high in the minds of the community through many channels is painstakingly outlined in the work of Oreskes and Conway.⁷ These authors reveal that global corporations not only harnessed the support of unscrupulous media, they also funded unprincipled scientists and think-tanks to publish counter-arguments and to continue the cry that the absence of the causal link and the fuzziness of the science meant that there was no need for any change.

Australian tobacco activists have seen through this fuzziness and over the most recent decades have taken our country in small but incremental steps to be one of the leaders in the world in the declining use/abuse of tobacco.⁸ Every tool in the public health

Abstract

Issue addressed: Although the evidence base for climate change is indisputable and the potential human health impact is extremely concerning, to date public health professionals are playing little part in influencing community change to accept and act on the science.

Method: In reviewing the techniques used to obstruct action on tobacco control by vested interests through constantly raising doubt about the science in this arena, a similar pattern is seen in obstructing action on climate change.

Results: It is clear that the raising of unverified doubt is the primary tool employed by profit-driven corporations to prevent constructive action in both these arenas, with the very high potential for the health of the whole population to suffer as a result.

Conclusion: Those promoting the health of Australians have a responsibility to optimise health in this regard and need to think differently through embracing complexity science and then take action, with the first step being to provide constant counter-arguments to the unsubstantiated statements of the 'doubt-sayers'.

Key words: climate change, sustainability and health, fundamental determinant of health, wicked problems.

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So what?

By influencing greater acceptance of the science of climate change, those concerned with promoting the health of Australians can get on with taking action around this most fundamental determinant of health.

armamentarium has been brought out to counteract the deceit and every action area of the Ottawa Charter has been harnessed to enable people to be healthier in this arena. It has taken more than 20 years of effort, but we are at last getting our message across and influencing change in the desired direction.

In the past couple of years, we can see that similar negative tactics are being used by those with vested interests in maintaining the status quo in the world's addiction to fossil fuels, and the resulting environmental pollution and eventual ecosystem breakdown that is getting out of hand. Oreskes reports on the same dismal sequence of events in relation to the science of climate change, with her keen analysis revealing that not only are the methods almost identical, many of the unprincipled tobacco control contrarians are actually the same scientists. Although they have moved to a new controversial topic, Oreskes' systematic investigations show how these opportunists maintain their same tried and tested mechanisms, furthering their own personal fortunes through working to retain or increase income to their funders – the fossil fuel corporations.⁷

The approach of these anti-climate change activists reveals that they have a keen understanding of how to respond multi-strategically. They work locally by such means as contributing to social media interactions, planting letters to editors, penning op-ed columns and engaging talk-back radio hosts. They work globally by attacking both the message and the messenger – belittling the science through purposefully miscommunicating the latest published findings, pouring scorn on the peer-review system and even questioning the ethics of individual peer reviewers.⁷ A key mechanism is the use of repetition, as they recognise the way people are frequently convinced that a statement repeated often enough has assumed credibility, even if the initial statement is a total fabrication. They never lose any opportunity to raise doubt and to suggest to those listening that just as with tobacco, since the absolute causal link is not proven, all of us are expected, even entitled, to sit back and do nothing.

In view of the seriousness of this threat to human health and the exponential damage resulting from delay, all of us committed to promoting health have a responsibility first to think differently, then to act urgently. Einstein warned us that "a new kind of thinking is required if mankind is to survive and move towards higher levels".⁹ Our new kind of thinking should embrace the logic of complexity science with all the messy and reverberating interactions that go with it,^{10,11} recognising that we will err if we continue to labour along linear lines following our public health tradition of reductionist science, with its central tenet that defined causes attain predictable, bounded effects. We must acknowledge we are working now with so-called 'wicked' problems in a complex causal web characterised by non-linearity, uncertainty, feedback loops and the potential for rapid emergence of unpredictable outcomes.¹² We must resist the current ideology of individualism which in our discipline has resulted in repeated drifting away from the need to address broad social determinants and reverted to the safety of narrow, linear, individual-based, risk factor approaches.

Within this mindset we must combine our energies to act, with

our first step being to fight these 'doubt-sayers'. We must not procrastinate. We must become totally familiar with their underhanded methods and endeavour to respond every time we see, read or hear a doubt being raised that is based on inadequate or unsubstantiated evidence. We must develop skills in keeping the media honest. We must remain in constant touch with the latest research findings so that we can confidently counter-balance the fictional doubt through high quality public health advocacy. Our experience in the tobacco wars has shown us we can win. But the tobacco problem pales when we realise that where it required a linear response, we now need a complex reaction; where only those exposed to tobacco smoke were at risk, we need to recognise that every person on the planet is now at threat. Good health promoters and public health practitioners have the skills to influence change. Our first step is to negate the doubts. From today onwards, the power of having the last and compelling word needs to be ours.

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