
Comment on historical article

Randomised controlled trial of anti-smoking advice in pregnancy¹: 20 years on

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I am most grateful to the Editor for selecting one of my papers for inclusion in this 50th anniversary series, and for inviting me to contribute the commentary. By way of preparation I reopened my own work after 20 years with great interest but some trepidation. Had it aged better, or worse, than I had?

The randomised controlled trial of anti-smoking advice in pregnancy was inspired by the time I spent assisting Charles Fletcher and others on the editorial team of the second (1971) Royal College of Physicians report on smoking,² and I offer all members of that team a belated acknowledgment. Although the trial was carried out in London, I had returned to Australia before the paper was published, so the Editor has asked me to relate how action against smoking has developed in Australia in the last 20 years.

Societal events happen when society is ready to let them happen, and the mid-1970s Australia to which I returned was very different from the Australia I had left in 1969. Change was all around, but most proposed changes had vociferous opponents. In national politics there had been a change of government ending 23 years of Coalition (Conservative) rule.

The first and very tentative anti-smoking campaign had started under the coalition. It was called the *National Warning Against Smoking*, but the amount allocated to public health campaigns in those days was so small that it could never have been expected to have any great effect. In this period also the National Health and Medical Research Council had pressed for warnings on cigarette packets and in advertising, but the good intentions were thwarted. The tobacco industry successfully lobbied to change the warning while the bill was being debated in Parliament, so that smoking was described as a 'health hazard'. As we found out only later, Australians understood that to mean a bad habit³; the industry had done its homework, and the health bodies had not. In retrospect, all we achieved directly was visibility for our views, but this created this opportunity for further action.

The honour for the most important achievement in this period goes to Nigel Gray, then of the Anti-Cancer Council of Victoria. The Labor (Labour) governments from 1972-75 were more sympathetic to action against smoking than were their predecessors. While Labor

was still in opposition Gray had persuaded the party to phase out radio and television advertising of tobacco. Labor in government kept this promise, but was dismissed before the end of the phasing out period; fortunately Gray had also obtained support from the incoming Coalition Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser.

Something else having been achieved, more could be placed on the public agenda. In 1977 a senate committee headed by Senator Peter Baume (now Professor of Community Medicine at the University of New South Wales) made recommendations to government on many aspect of tobacco control.⁴ Few of these recommendations were acted on in the Fraser years, but they did provide an agenda for action.

While at the time this might not have seemed its most important component, one avenue the Baume report publicised was rights of the non-smoker. The tobacco industry brought this very potent force on itself by its actions at the public hearings. About 15 of its executives crowded into the hearing room and chain-smoked in support as their representative gave his evidence, at the end of which several senators were in need of fresh air. It was not too long before there were bans on smoking on public transport and in confined spaces such as lifts.

The next move was to extend the bans to smoking in the workplace. It was prompted by legal advice that there was a duty to provide a safe workplace, but has since been extended. Smoking is banned or about to be banned in all confined public places including shopping centres. The bans on smoking at airports and on aircraft may not have benefited the health of many, but certainly influenced the opinion makers who, because of Australia's size, spent much time flying. In 1996, these bans are well accepted by smokers, who rarely challenge them.

The groundwork against tobacco advertising in the 1970s has finally succeeded, with abolition of print media advertising in 1990 and cessation of sports promotion from the end of the 1995-96 cricket season. Australian summer television will hardly be the same without the backdrop of hoardings promoting tobacco products!

Australians have made some original contributions to anti-smoking techniques. These started with Simon Chapman and the Movement Opposed to Promotion of Unhealthy

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Products, or MOP-UP. Soon we also had Billboard Using Graffitiists Against Unhealthy Products (BUGA-UP), whose activities raised many a smile, including fortunately with the magistracy when those who had been apprehended faced court for 'improving' tobacco advertising. Their contribution to a shift in public opinion should not be overlooked.

Another Australian innovation, credit for which again goes to Gray, was persuading state and territory governments to levy additional taxes on tobacco products, to be used for health promotion. These were popular moves, and I am proud to have played a key role in their introduction in Canberra, but unfortunately the state and territory governments, just as they had done a century before with different rail gauges, did not tax at the same levels. The lower prices of tobacco products in Queensland led to a resurgence of good old-fashioned smuggling!

What had all this done to tobacco consumption? In 1992 only 28.2% of Australian

men and 23.8% of Australian women aged 16 and over said they smoked.⁵ There were considerable gradients with educational attainment and with occupation both in these percentages and in the average number of cigarettes smoked per day.

Have we been more effective against smoking than our counterparts in other countries? I am not so sure. Jim Hacker's encounter with an enthusiastic health minister⁶ rang just as true here as it presumably did to viewers in the UK.

To my counterparts in the UK, please keep up the good work.

- 1 Donovan JW. Randomised controlled trial of anti-smoking advice in pregnancy. *Br J Prev Soc Med* 1977;31:6-12.
- 2 Royal College of Physicians. Smoking and health now. London: Pitman Medical and Scientific, 1971.
- 3 Long A. "What does 'hazard mean?' A survey of Sydney schoolchildren. *Med J Aust* 1975;2:175-7.
- 4 Australia, Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare. Drug problems in Australia - an intoxicated society? Canberra: AGPS, 1977.
- 5 Hill DJ, White VM. Australian adult smoking prevalence in 1992. *Aust J Publ Hlth* 1995;19:305-8.
- 6 Lynn J, Jay A. The smokescreen. In *Yes Prime Minister* Vol I, pp 187-211. London: BBC Publications, 1986.