

Smoke and mirrors on issue funding won't deter critics

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Opinion

When it comes to communicating your sources of funding, the issue isn't just how things are, but how things appear, writes crisis comms expert Tony Jaques.

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by TONY JAUQUES

Transparency should be the basis for effective issue management, especially when it comes to who's paying the bills. How a campaign is funded not only needs to be appropriate, but must also be seen to be appropriate.

This was the lesson for a group of doctors lobbying for nicotine e-cigarettes as a way to help people quit smoking when a [news report](#) revealed their set-up funding came from an e-liquid supplier and an e-cigarette company.



The Australian Tobacco Harm Reduction Association (ATHRA), which wants to overturn the ban on vaping nicotine without a doctor's prescription, said it would "get funding from the vendors and whoever else – not tobacco companies obviously – but it will be at arm's length, with a view to having a detailed website on the safety of e-cigarettes, where to buy them, how to use them."

Asked why they had removed the founding sponsors' logos from their website, ATHRA Chair Colin Mendelsohn reportedly said it had been done on legal advice and not to "reduce transparency." However the website of the [e-cigarette maker](#), which offers an online medical prescription service, still says "Nicovape is proudly a sponsor of the Australian Tobacco Harm Reduction Association," alongside the association's logo.

While Mendelsohn told Fairfax the vaping industry is "quite separate from the tobacco industry", the perception is very different. Although the Association's two Australian sponsors are small local companies, the vaping industry worldwide is in fact well and truly dominated by Big Tobacco.

Recent analysis [reported](#) the vaping industry is today worth about \$10 billion globally and is expected to reach \$34 billion by 2021. And whereas it was once the province of small businesses, the vaping industry is increasingly the domain by the major tobacco companies, which own some of the world's biggest e-cigarette brands.

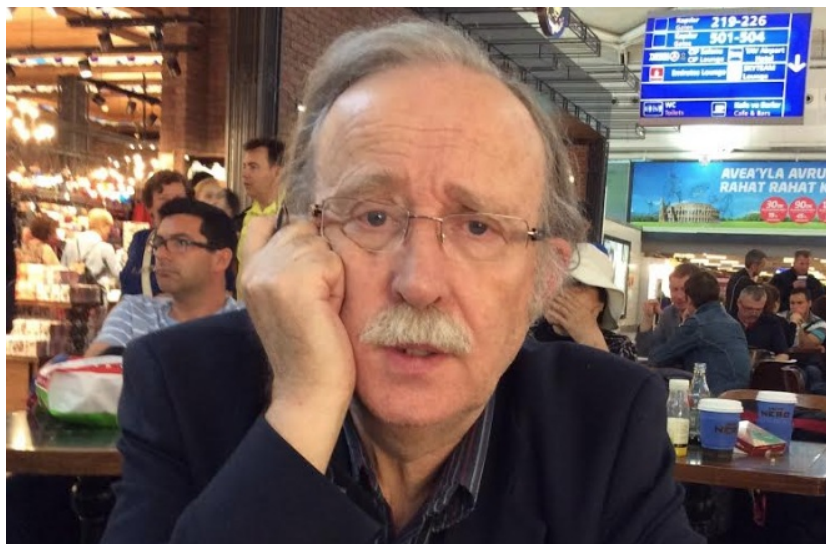
Moreover the National Health and Medical Research Council says there is insufficient evidence to conclude whether e-cigarettes can help smokers quit. The Council also says the widely used claim that e-cigarettes are 95% less harmful than tobacco cigarettes comes from a study based on opinion rather than empirical evidence, with concerns raised about potential conflicts of interest.

Big Tobacco has a long history of using front organisations to fight restrictive regulations. Think no further than the Alliance of Australian Retailers which was established to oppose plain packaging of cigarettes and claimed to represent owners of corner stores, milk bars, news agents and service stations. It was soon revealed that their TV advertising was almost entirely funded by three of the world's largest tobacco companies, and plain packaging became the law.

However the cigarette industry is by no means alone in the creation of fake community groups. For example, some years ago the makers of cardboard milk cartons set up "Mothers Opposed to Pollution" as a supposed environmental activist group to campaign against plastic milk containers in Australia and New Zealand. Then there was shopping mall giant Westfield which once admitted in court that it had used apparently independent local resident groups to resist rival retail developments.

The purpose in the present case is not to suggest that ATHRA is a front organisation, or to cast doubt on the sincerity of well-intentioned doctors who want to change the law.

But in terms of issue management, it raises the question whether the association has seemingly allowed itself to be compromised by commercial interests. The issue here is not just how things are, but how things appear, and whether trusted medical practitioners should be seen to be lobbying on behalf of the makers of nicotine-based e-cigarettes.



Tony Jaques is the managing director of Issue Outcomes P/L.

Secret industry funding of doctor-led vaping lobby group laid bare

smh.com.au/healthcare/secret-industry-funding-of-doctor-led-vaping-lobby-group-laid-bare-20180823-p4zzc5.html

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By Esther Han

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A doctor-led charity leading the fight to legalise the vaping of nicotine and giving the impression it is free of industry ties had accepted initial funding from e-cigarette businesses, Fairfax Media can reveal.

In carefully worded statements on its website and in press releases, the Australian Tobacco Harm Reduction Association (ATHRA) says it doesn't accept tobacco company donations and its directors have no financial relationships with e-cigarette companies, giving the impression it is independent.



Vaping proponents say legalising e-cigarettes would save lives *Credit: Joe Armao*

But Fairfax Media can reveal ATHRA, created last year and fiercely lobbying for change, had accepted initial funding from vaping interests – \$15,000 from e-liquid supplier Nicopharm and \$2500 from e-cigarette maker Nicovape – to cover set-up costs.

"We do not say that we do not accept funding from the vaping industry, which is quite separate from the tobacco industry," ATHRA chairman and tobacco treatment specialist Colin Mendelsohn said.

"ATHRA's acceptance of untied donations from e-cigarette companies is no different to the National Heart Foundation and Cancer Council accepting donations from pharmaceutical companies."

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While this statement holds true for the Heart Foundation, the Cancer Council said it rejected drug company money as a matter of policy and principle.

ATHRA Ltd is a not-for-profit health promotion association (awaiting approval as a charity)
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Screenshot: ATHRA's website briefly showed information on "foundation sponsors"*Credit: Associate Professor Matthew Peters*

ATHRA's main aim is to overturn the ban on vaping nicotine and give smokers struggling to quit a safer, "life-saving" alternative, which it argues is 95 per cent less harmful.

Seizing the agenda

At the Global Forum on Nicotine (GFN) in Poland a few months before establishing ATHRA, Dr Mendelsohn spoke of organising a "public education campaign ... independently run by doctors" to "correct community misperceptions".

He said it would "get funding from the vendors and whoever else – not tobacco companies obviously – but that will be at arm's length, with a view to having a detailed website on safety of e-cigarettes, where to buy them, how to use them".

Since then, ATHRA has made great strides in Australia, managing to generate positive [media coverage](#) and forge strong relationships with conservative politicians, triggering public health experts to question who's funding their activities.

In March a parliamentary committee – which usually delivers consensus reports – split on party lines when it handed down a [report concluding](#) the nicotine vaping ban should remain, with three Liberal members submitting dissenting statements.

Secret nicotine money

ATHRA had briefly disclosed its relationship with Nicopharm and Nicovape when it published their logos and called them "foundation sponsors" at the bottom of its website.

When asked why it removed the logos, Dr Mendelsohn explained it had received legal advice that mentioning the vaping businesses might be in breach of state and federal laws and it was not trying to "reduce transparency".

"If ATHRA is to achieve its goal of reducing the harm from tobacco smoking in Australia, it will require funding for establishment costs and ongoing expenses," he said.

"The funding provided was unconditional and ATHRA does not directly promote either business. Neither is mentioned on the website or is provided with any direct benefits."

Simon Chapman, emeritus professor of public health at Sydney University, who opposes vaping, said all funding information should be prominently displayed on ATHRA's website.

"All these companies have commercial interests in smoking cessation or vaping. People expect full transparency," he said.

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Recently, a CSIRO scientific literature review found regular vaping may cause "adverse health effects" but trigger levels weren't clear and, compared to smoking, improved health but could introduce "dual use".

ATHRA said despite the negative executive summary, the CSIRO provided "strong support for vaping as a way of reducing harm".

But Mr Chapman said: "I thought they must have been commenting on a different report. It says e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation method, compared to others, is not known".

ATHRA's directors include Perth GP Dr Joe Kosterich and addiction medicine specialist Dr Alex Wodak.

Dr Mendelsohn said he paid for all of his trips to GFN in Poland and to meet with MPs in Canberra.

He has received more than \$32,300 from Pfizer between 2015 and 2017, according to a Charles Perkins Centre database, but he pointed out Pfizer was against vaping and had no influence on him.

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