



Are evil tobacco companies the only enemy facing smokers? ANDREW CHUBB investigates the smokers' fire.

Pictures:
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Social stigma for a smoker's choice

Dean is 32. He took up smoking 17 years ago, back when it was cool. Now he feels like a leper. He's worried about his health but he's addicted and continues to smoke 20-30 "coffin nails" a day, consciously avoiding the grisly medical pictures on his packet with a flick of his thumb.

Will all the Deans out there eventually manage to quit? It's unlikely. So what does the future hold for those Deans who don't quit – the lifetime smokers? Let's start with the good news: only half of them will be killed by their habit. Only a quarter by the age of 70. And they'll only die, on average, 10 years younger, according to a British Medical Journal report. Well, what would they actually do with that geriatric decade anyway? So that's the good news.

The bad news for lifetime smokers is that their remaining years – however few – might just be spent facing disrespect and exploitation, menace and

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Dr Owen Carter, a research fellow with Curtin's Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer Control, works with focus groups to help develop the anti-smoking message.

“Most smokers now suggest that they're social pariahs,” he says. “They light up a cigarette in a public place and they catch people with disdainful, scornful looks on their faces.”

“That's great as far as we're concerned. The problem is we can't victimise smokers, we have to be supportive of them to quit, but at the same time, socially engineer it that they're social pariahs.”

For him, the campaign is war. “We're using everything in our arsenal – whether it's social engineering or giving people an informed choice,” he says.

The socially-engineered attitudes Dr Carter speaks of have variously been criticised as “self-righteousness”, “pious herd mentality” and “moral hysteria”. The late comedian Bill Hicks famously

told non-smokers, “My biggest fear, if I quit smoking, is that I'll become one of you!”.

But Dr Carter counters: “People feel more at liberty now to criticise someone who's smoking in a public place because less than one in five people smoke now, so they're certainly a social minority...who can potentially harm that 80 per cent by passive smoking.”

Boston University social and behavioural sciences Professor Michael Siegel could be described as an anti-smoking, anti-antismoking campaigner: he's a tobacco control expert but an outspoken critic of the anti-smoking movement, which he describes as “extremist”.

“My perception is that the movement is in a situation where the most extreme views now prevail,” he says.

Professor Siegel says calls for smoking bans in outdoor areas are an example of extremism.

“I would say that the risks of second-hand smoke have been overstated by anti-smoking groups,” he says.

Legislation in Western Australia has ended smoking in most enclosed public places, including restaurants, pubs and clubs. But the US Surgeon-General's finding this year that “there is no risk-free level of exposure to second-hand smoke” means for some a ban on smoking outdoors is necessary to protect non-smokers.

Car exhaust fumes contain – among other things – carbon monoxide (‘deadly’ according to government warnings on cigarette packets), soot and nitrogen dioxide, a poisonous and corrosive gas. The latter can react with water droplets to form acid rain. So why smokers and not car drivers?

Earlier this year Professor Siegel wrote on his Tobacco Analysis blog: “The singling out of [smokers] suggests that there is something deeper going on, something beneath the surface. And I think what's underlying it is a desire to punish smokers.”

UWA political science honorary research fellow Dr Saul Newman says the campaign can be seen as a “tyranny of the majority”.

“Passive smoking causes quite serious health effects to other people but I also think the pendulum has swung too far the other way,” he says.

Dr Newman says the anti-smoking campaign is underpinned by a “religious zealotry”.

“What's really behind it is this kind of moralism dressed up as public health interest,” he says.

“It's almost Victorian, I think, in terms of its moral hysteria.”

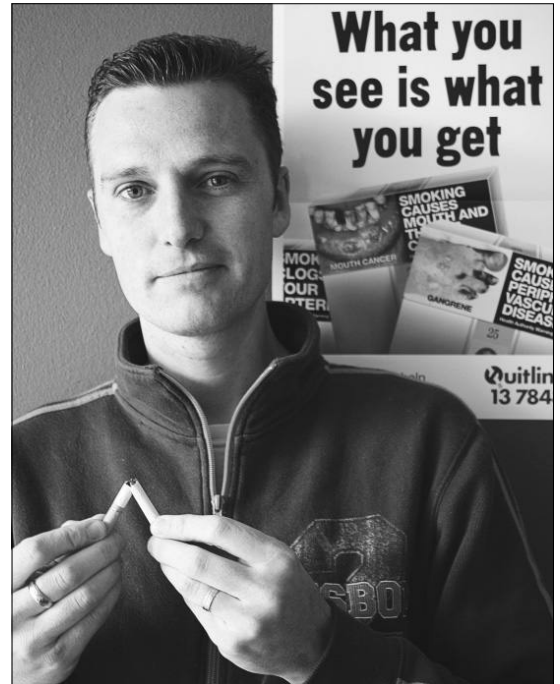
“You don't find, for instance, the same type of zealotry when it comes to alcohol and you could actually make the argument that excessive consumption of alcohol is potentially more socially harmful than smoking is.”

Curtin University Professor of Health Policy Mike Daube agrees – about the harm caused by alcohol, that is.

“Alcohol causes fewer deaths [than tobacco] but far more social problems,” he says.

“I've never had the view that we should see one as more important than the other.”

Should, then, the mangled body of a drunk-driving crash victim be plastered across beer bottles?



EDUCATED CHOICE: Dr Owen Carter just wants what is best for you.

How about a sloppy, misshapen alcoholic's liver? The Australian cartoonist and columnist Bill Leak satirised this possibility in a column in May.

“Why has the Government stopped at coffin nails?” he asked. “There are so many dangerous things irresponsible people do every day in their reckless pursuit of fun that it's high time warnings were placed on just about everything.”

“Sex, like smoking is both addictive and dangerous. Photographs of herpes-encrusted penises should be mandatory for every pair of women's knickers and men's underpants.”

So why the inconsistency? Well, you guessed it – vested interests. Professor Daube explains: “You go to an emergency department any day of the week, let alone Saturday night, the evidence is absolutely overwhelming about the consequences of excessive drinking. Would it justify warning labels? Absolutely, yes. Is there a snowball's chance in hell of it happening? No because [the alcohol] industry is so incredibly powerful.”

“[Scientists] get bought off. If you look at the people the food and drink industries are funding, they pick very carefully the people who they think might oppose them and they fund them.”

So the alcohol industry's position now is akin to the tobacco industry's 35 years ago?

“That's right, before we started demonising them,” Prof Daube says.

Professor Daube insists the war is against tobacco companies and not individual smokers. “You don't attack smokers. You attack the tobacco industry,” he says. “You don't say smokers are idiots.”

But do you just assume it?

“I can read!” was one smoker's indignant response to the introduction of graphic health warnings on cigarette packets.

“The old warnings said things like, ‘SMOKING KILLS’, and ‘SMOKING CAUSES HEART DISEASE’.”

Ministerial Tobacco Advisory Group chairman Dr David Hille has identified smokers being “prepared to take” the risks of smoking as a reason for the new graphic warnings. Does this imply that smokers are already informed of the risks? If so, has the campaign moved beyond informing the public of the risks?

Professor Daube doesn't believe smokers' choices can be described as informed.

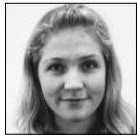
“By and large, who are the smokers?” he asks. “They're people of lower socio-economic status, lower educational attainment, they're people who don't understand the evidence – that's not being patronising. They certainly don't read the literature and so on, so there's no way they're aware of the evidence.”

“Because the evidence is so vast, I don't know all the risks. You can see how many shelves there are of volumes on tobacco,” he says, motioning to the floor-to-ceiling bookcase on the opposite wall of his office.

There are eight shelves. So it's simple: smokers wishing to redeem their right to free choice need only to demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of the body



ENEMY OF THE STATE: Luke Southern and Barry Roberts smoke outside a pub.

FEATURES

JACQUI BAHR takes a look at the work that goes on at the Rocky Bay day centre and makes a few new friends along the way.

Picture:
JACQUI BAHR

Living life the Rocky Bay way

Malcolm Burgess sits in the sunny courtyard at the Rocky Bay Discovering Abilities day centre and talks about life before his accident.

"I used to think that disabled people in wheelchairs couldn't think, but it's not true," he says.

A drunken car accident at the age of 22 left Burgess in a coma for five months. When he awoke everything around him was white. Burgess felt like he was floating above the bed. His conscience was strangely disjointed and he felt as though he was there but he wasn't. He tried to move but he was strapped to the bed. He didn't know who he was or how he got there and he couldn't ask anyone because he was alone in the room. All he knew was that he was terrified.

When a nurse finally came to the room she told him that he had had a car accident in Geraldton the previous year. He had suffered a brain injury and was diagnosed with spastic quadriplegia. He was now completely paralysed and would spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair.

The brain damage suffered in the accident affected his short-term memory but he assures me that his long-term

"This place is full of quite a few colourful personalities and we have a lot of fun together."

memory is probably better than my own. Burgess now has trouble speaking and sometimes has to repeat himself several times to be understood. But however many times he has to repeat himself, his huge smile never wavers. Although there is often a time delay due to this, his jokes never fail to make those around him laugh.

Burgess, now 44, has spent the past 16 years at Rocky Bay. The non-profit Mosman Park organisation provides care and support for people with disabilities, particularly those with neuromuscular and other neurological disorders. His clients include people with muscular dystrophy, spina bifida, cerebral palsy and those with an acquired brain injury. Rocky Bay currently supports more than 700 children and adults with disabilities. The centre

provides client accommodation and clinical therapy and helps them find jobs.

From 9am – 3pm weekdays, the Rocky Bay day centre buzzes with activity. This is where I found veteran volunteer Lois Mettam. While painting a client's fingernails Mettam explains that she has been a volunteer for the past 36 years and for the past 30 years, she has been coming every Friday to teach cooking classes.

"They're all my friends now so I just like coming here," she says.

David Bowman is the genial coordinator of the day centre. After starting out as a wheat and sheep farmer and then becoming a horse-riding instructor for disabled people, he volunteered at Rocky Bay for only two days before he promptly became a staff member. He has now been there for three years and has encountered his fair share of characters.

"This place is full of quite a few colourful personalities and we have a lot of fun together," he says.

Bowman sees his role at the day centre as not instructing the clients, but working with them on their projects.

"We don't choose the activities, the clients do. Our job is to make what they want to do possible," he says.

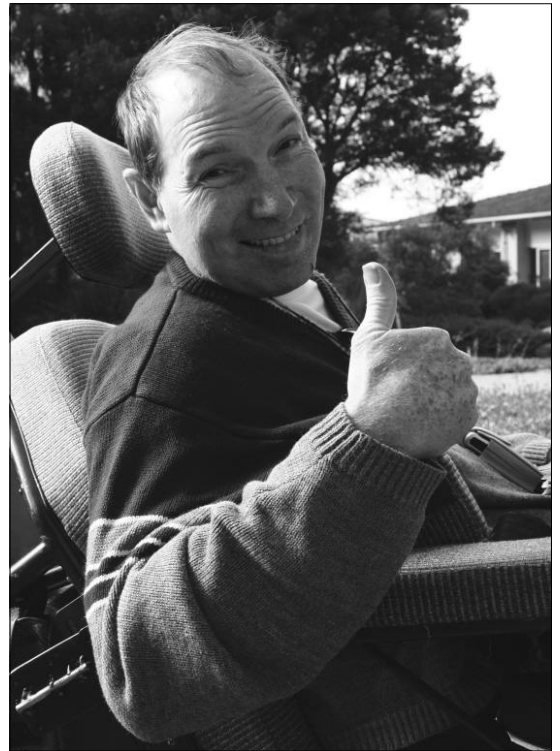
"There may be, for instance, a mosaic that I could just finish off in a few minutes. This may take the client weeks to finish and it's easier for me to do it for them.

"But it's not our job to interfere like that. The clients need to obtain the confidence and boost their sense of achievement from completing these tasks themselves. That's what we're all about here."

Among the activities are balloon soccer, woodwork, ceramics, painting, upholstery, electric wheelchair sports, cooking and computer classes. Fellow day centre co-ordinator Jane Anne McLarty shares a similar philosophy to Bowman.

"The service should be as much as possible reflect what would be okay for you and I to receive," she says.

McLarty has been interested in the industry since her eldest daughter was born with a disability. In 1967 a doctor told McLarty her daughter would never speak or go to school and that she was lucky they lived on a farm because her daughter could commune with the cows.



ROCKY'S RESIDENT WRITER: Malcom Burgess loves to laugh.

"I was convinced she needed to have an opportunity in life," she says.

McLarty's daughter has since learnt to speak and has received an education from an array of schools — only some of which were special needs based — and she now volunteers at Rocky Bay.

According to McLarty, the day centre is not only about providing choice, but allowing clients to obtain more socially-valued roles. The contract work such as jewellery making allows the clients to earn money — and become consumers.

This is especially brought to attention when Burgess offers me a copy of his book - but not for free.

"It's \$10 but I also accept bribes," he says.

Burgess says his favourite activities are painting and writing. He has even produced a collection of memoirs and poems entitled *The Life Times of Malcolm Burgess*. In it he reveals that writing is one of the few ways he can be accepted and seen as a normal person.

"Writing camouflages the wheelchair," he says.

"By looking at the words I put down on paper, people can't tell that I am

disabled."

Burgess says his attitude has not always been so positive. It took him years to accept what had happened to him and he still battles with it.

"Sometimes when I see people playing footy I want to join in but I can't," he says.

"I still feel like I can walk but I can't. It's hard."

One of the things he finds hard is not being able to get out of bed by himself. This requires a carer and a hoist. But although there are a lot of things Burgess can't do now, he's still feels like the same person.

"I'm still the same inside," he says.

And he is. When discussing what it's like to have a disability, Burgess says people often see the wheelchair before they see the person. Although he writes so others will see him as "normal," Burgess argues that he is a normal person. He despises the thought of anyone feeling sorry for him and any feelings of sympathy are quickly overshadowed by his sarcasm and cheeky disposition.

When asked what he will be doing for the rest of the day he replies with an audacious grin: "I'll be in tears."

"By looking at the words I put down on paper, people can't tell that I am disabled."

Smokers – the modern outcasts

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of medical research on the subject.

A smoking exam is all it would take to sift out those who don't study adequately — only they need to be subjected to the scare campaign.

And you do have to scare people away from unhealthy practices, according to Professor Daube.

"If you've got mates who drive, what stops them from speeding? Fear of getting caught," he says.

"Is it paternalistic? No, it's just part of what the government does."

For Dr Carter, however, the campaign is unashamedly paternalistic.

"There's pretty much no smokers now at all that would suggest that the risks are being exaggerated," he says.

"[Paternalism] is totally justifiable. It's a health issue. It's still the biggest preventable cause of death in Australia by far."

Dean, the lifetime smoker, agrees.

"It's not accepted anymore," he says.

"Everyone knows what it does to you."

Another lifetime smoker, John, says the campaign "obviously doesn't work" because his addiction is stronger than the images.

"It's not right but you've got to accept it," he says.

The graphic health warnings will make more smokers quit, according to Dr Carter.

"It's obviously a disgusting image," he says.

"They're not going to quit just because they see it once. But they're going to see it repeatedly, every time they reach for a cigarette, so they'll actually start associating the cigarette with these images."

That "smokers hate it ... really hate it" is a good sign.

What can explain such open disdain for individual choice — and smokers' acceptance of this?

Is it the costs smokers impose on society?

According to Quit WA, smoking costs Australia \$21.1 billion each year in direct and indirect costs. This clearly justifies the campaign against the tobacco industry, which imposes those costs. But the

study that came up with that figure also found tobacco tax revenue "does in fact exceed by a considerable margin the tobacco-attributable costs borne by the government sector".

In other words, governments actually profit from smokers. Not from smoking but from smokers who, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, tend to be poor. Or unemployed. Well, can't blame governments for trying to take back what they have handed out.

Professor Siegel says this makes graphic health warnings hypocritical.

"If the government really thinks the product is so bad, then it has no business allowing it," he says.

But Leak believes it is part of the "nanny state mentality".

"Successful governments, both federal and state seem to like to make a political point out of seeming to be very worried about our personal wellbeing," he says.

"Obviously they're trying to score political points out of it otherwise they wouldn't bother."