



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

ADJOURNMENT

Wind Farms: Health Effects

SPEECH

Monday, 17 March 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Date Monday, 17 March 2014
Page 1298
Questioner
Speaker Madigan, Sen John

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator MADIGAN (Victoria) (22:19): Tonight I rise to speak on the relationship between a community and their doctors and how that relationship has been bastardised. But first I will give the chamber some background. In January 2012, researchers at the renowned Stanford School of Medicine published a report that found tobacco companies had conducted a carefully crafted, decades-long campaign to manipulate throat doctors. The aim was to calm concerns among an increasingly worried public that smoking might be bad for their health.

The campaign by the tobacco industry, beginning in the 1920s, continued for over half a century. I repeat, it continued for more than 50 years. Tobacco companies successfully influenced physicians to not only promote the notion that smoking was healthy but actually to recommend it as a treatment for throat irritation. The tobacco industry did this by schmoozing doctors and by bribing them, and for a long period of time it was a widespread and successful campaign. So it is clear that the medical profession is not immune to outside pressure, to financial inducements, and to the lure of research grants and corporate donations. It happens, it is real and it impacts members of our community in devastating ways.

Australia is not exempt from this. A 2006 University of New South Wales paper by Susan Engel and Brian Martin says companies have a range of techniques to devalue, demonise, discredit or vilify victims of corporate activities. Companies can label victims as misguided, ignorant, complainers, self-seeking, vindictive, pawns in the hands of anti-corporate manipulators, or even as criminals. The paper quotes the CEO of CSR in the late 1980s, who referred to asbestos claimants as 'malingerers'. The asbestos industry in Australia hid medical evidence of the health impacts of asbestos dust from at least the mid-1930s through to the late 1970s. As late as 1976 a pamphlet from James Hardie denied outright any risk to consumers of asbestos products. And parts of the medical industry—and I use the word 'industry' deliberately—were complicit in this.

With the benefit of hindsight, we look back at such practices—such corruption and venality—with appropriate horror. And we hope it would not happen in this country again. But this brings me to a current example of a major Australian company—a

household name—that has attempted to influence and intervene in people's relationships with their doctors. I have in my possession a letter written by one of our power generation companies, AGL—a household name in Australia and, for many, a trusted name. In November 2012, AGL wrote to doctors at 12 clinics across western Victoria about one of its power generation facilities, the Macarthur wind farm. These medical practices span an area of several hundred kilometres, from Hamilton in the north to Portland and Warrnambool in the south.

In short, the letter aims to discredit and discount any patient visiting any doctor with any claims of ill health brought about by living near the Macarthur wind farm. It is an outrageous and pre-emptive example of corporate propaganda and was directed straight into the consulting rooms of rural and regional doctors. It suggested that anyone presenting to their doctor with symptoms of wind turbine syndrome should be directed by that doctor to visit the AGL Macarthur wind farm website or to ring the Macarthur wind farm community engagement team! If a similar letter had come from a coalmine or a coal seam gas company, I am sure Senator Di Natale and the Greens would be howling in selective moral outrage. This letter categorically denies any health impacts from living near wind turbines.

This is a blatant lie. It is now on the public record that many residents near Macarthur wind farm have experienced serious health effects and repetitive sleep disturbance since the beginning of operation of merely 15 of the 140 turbines at the beginning of October 2012. In 2013, when the turbines had been operating for not even a year, a preliminary health survey was carried out, anonymously, in this district—and the results were astounding. Around 23 families responded to this survey, indicating around 66 people living out to eight kilometres were already experiencing detrimental impacts from the turbines. Once again, AGL has totally denied responsibility. It is extraordinary and sobering that so many families who have lived in this district happily and healthily for between 30 and 50 years suddenly all began to experience serious health symptoms at the same time when the turbines began operation. And it is on the public record that rural and regional communities living near turbines around the world are suffering similar symptoms.

In support of its propaganda, in that letter to local doctors dated 13 November 2012 AGL quoted an organisation called the Climate and Health Alliance. The CAHA includes a coterie of known public health pro-wind supporters such as Fiona Armstrong, Liz Hanna, Peter Tait, Suzie Bourke, Michael Moore and Simon Chapman. The CAHA is not an independent health body by any stretch of the imagination. It is a pro-wind health lobby group whose clinical members ignore their professional ethics and the known science. And did this letter from AGL to doctors across Victoria work? I have in front of me a statement from one local resident, Janet Hetherington, who said her doctor's reaction to her symptoms changed remarkably after he received the AGL letter. Janet said she felt violated by the experience. And she was forced to seek medical help elsewhere.

This is unprofessional and dishonest behaviour by a major Australian company. Like the tobacco and asbestos industries, the wind power generation sector has long known its products make people sick. I call on the government to move as quickly as possible towards independent eminent health research into wind farms.

Senate adjourned at 22:28