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# CSIRO in Bed with Tobacco Lobbyist

Peter Pockley questions why CSIRO has appointed a new Communications Director with a long record defending the tobacco industry.

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The decision by CSIRO's Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett, and his Deputy, Dr Ron Sandland, to appoint a former lawyer and tobacco industry defender and lobbyist as "corporate" Communication Director has staggered scientists inside and outside the national research agency. But, Donna Staunton had a rails run to the job after being engaged on contract since May 2003.

While Staunton has simply moved from the unadvertised position of internal "consultant" to Acting Director, the fees for headhunters engaged for the job, Korn/Ferry, grew to \$100,000. This was enough to pay for a senior scientist's salary. Questions have been asked in the Senate about Staunton's salary and previous contract costs, as well as Garrett's links with Spencer Stuart, another headhunter he has used frequently, during his time as President of CSIR in South Africa.

Garrett and Sandland talk about CSIRO's "great science". Yet, CSIRO has had generally "bad press" as Garrett's "reforms" sweep through, always highlighting the paramount position of "management" over science.

Since taking over the communications role from Di Jay, who had been recruited from Medibank Private and was equally unqualified in science and its communication, Staunton has overseen the issue of media releases that lack original scientific content. It was a great leap of faith to believe that anyone who can produce no evidence of publicly communicating the nature and value of science can be discriminating over scientific content and can advise and edit the work of others. This is the most public indication of how CSIRO's science has slipped under Garrett.

Garrett has disappeared entirely from public view, only popping up to a very limited audience in Senate Estimates. Questions are being asked about how Staunton can reinvent Garrett, who has consistently failed to talk authoritatively, interestingly and persuasively about science (*AS*, Nov/Dec 2003, pp.41-42).

It is puzzling why Garrett imagined that CSIRO's salvation was to put their public presentation in the hands of someone whose tobacco industry connection had the potential to become an ongoing story in itself and a source of distrust within the organisation. The leader of communications for the nation's largest research agency should have had a proven track record as a

her time as a stout defender of smoking. "Professional" PR people may claim that they are able to work for any client, like a lawyer accepting any brief, but it is hard to see how this applies with Staunton due to her controversial work in the tobacco industry. Not to have required achievement in science communication in the most responsible institutional post in Australia – and the highest paid – diminishes the standing of the appointee within CSIRO.

Staunton was appointed Acting Director in November 2003 after overseeing the writing of CSIRO's Communications Strategy. In an internal memo in November, Sandland wrote to communications staff in CSIRO's divisions that CSIRO's Board had approved

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– DONNA STAUNTON

skillful communicator of science, preferably in mainstream media, with preference to an applicant who also had qualifications in science and had worked in a large scientific institution. These criteria should have been specified in the job description of June 2003, but Sandland justified these omissions by claiming that CSIRO needed someone who had skills in "managing people".

Inevitably CSIRO chose someone with supposed "business" skills but not a skerrick of knowledge of science, other than what was gathered during

the "strategy". *Australasian Science* cannot report on it as it has been held tightly within CSIRO. Sandland has refused our requests for a copy, claiming it is "an internal document".

Yet when Labor's science spokesman, Senator Kim Carr, asked for a copy in a Senate Estimates hearing on 18 February, Garrett willingly agreed to supply it. On these grounds, *Australasian Science* asked for a copy twice more but no copy has been forthcoming to Carr or us. Meanwhile, Staunton was already implementing a wholesale restructure of



communications throughout CSIRO.

Staunton began her professional life as a lawyer and came to attention as Senior Associate in the large Melbourne-based firm of Clayton Utz with a big brief from the tobacco industry. She then moved to the lobby group, the Tobacco Institute of Australia, as its Chief Executive Officer.

Later, she had a major international role as Vice-President, Corporate Affairs, for the Philip Morris Group (including Kraft Foods Ltd). Her work in defending tobacco, where legal tactics have been crucial in deflecting the many cases brought against tobacco companies, almost all of which have been lost, has been tracked closely by health professionals.

Simon Chapman, Professor of Public Health in Sydney University and a leader of the anti-tobacco movement, is amazed that CSIRO should have considered appointing a person with this background. He has a dossier on her record that Garrett and his headhunters could surely not fail to have examined.

For instance, in August 1994 Staunton told ABC TV program *Attitude*: "I don't think smoking is addictive". In February 1995 she expanded on this position,

telling a Senate Community Affairs References Committee: "I do not think smoking is addictive on any reasonable definition... If it means that tobacco smokers would become physically dependent, like heroin users, then tobacco smokers are not addicted."

According to Chapman: "Staunton has made no public apology for her years of high profile conduct that was designed to take political heat off the tobacco industry. The reason is almost certainly that the industry required its senior staff to sign hush clauses."

The cost to the nation of tobacco-induced disease was \$21.063 billion in 1998-99, mainly income lost from premature deaths. "This (appointment) might sit uncomfortably with CSIRO's much publicised P-Health Flagship, which promotes healthy living," pointed out former CSIRO Entomology Chief Dr Max Whitten in *The Funneled Web* on 1 March.

From Philip Morris, Staunton moved to AMP Ltd as Senior Vice-President, Corporate Affairs and Communications, and finally set up her own Staunton Consultancy in 2001. This has "provided high level strategic advice to a number of companies at the CEO

and Management level".

She has been on the Board of the right-wing think-tank, the Institute of Public Affairs, which has also defended smoking and opposes the Kyoto accord on greenhouse gases. She is on the Board of the Global Foundation, which has recruited CSIRO as a member with Garrett as its representative.

Staunton self-announced her appointment in person in Parliament House on 2 March. Soon afterwards, chiefs of CSIRO divisions and senior "executives" were told, followed by the communications staff now under her charge. As *Australasian Science* went to press a week later there had been no circular to all staff nor any statement to the news media.

Staunton was present in the Senate Estimates hearings on 18 February when Garrett faced a barrage of questions on potentially doubtful matters (see *Razor*, p.44). In a memo circulated to senior staff on 23 February she purported to be briefing them on what occurred in the Estimates hearings. Reading it makes anyone who watched and listened to the webcast wonder if she was in a totally different meeting. She omits all the sensitive and controversial issues raised in the sessions that *Australasian Science* saw and heard and have been recorded in Hansard.

Who was Staunton trying to fool? That Garrett came out of the hearings poorly and now confronts another raft of penetrating Questions on Notice is evident from a senior scientist who sent Staunton's memo to *Australasian Science* with this covering note:

"This spin doctoring of what actually occurred at Senate Estimates by Donna Staunton, Acting Communication Director, is beginning to rival that of John Howard and his government. The verbosity and circuitry of the answers from CSIRO personnel to the Estimates Committee is a disgrace from the top echelon of a supposedly scientific organisation."