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"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."

This sounds like something a tobacco executive might say, and indeed it is. What is surprising is that the person who uttered these words to a Senate Community Affairs References Committee has now been appointed as CSIRO's new Communications Director (see pp.37–38).

Donna Staunton is a former lawyer who acted on behalf of the tobacco industry before becoming Vice President of Corporate Affairs at Philip Morris and then Chief Executive Officer of the Tobacco Institute of Australia. Since moving into PR she has not publicly retracted her defence of tobacco.

Staunton takes on the role after a 10-month search by recruitment consultants had failed to find a suitable successor to Staunton's predecessor, Di Jay. Jay came to CSIRO with no experience in science or its communication; Staunton's only previous experience in science has been to use it to outmanoeuvre health authorities and tobacco litigants.

Her appointment must gall CSIRO scientists, particularly given the launch last year of CSIRO's Preventative Health Flagship. The credibility of any research emanating from P-Health will be diminished when its public communication is orchestrated by a former tobacco executive who has actively thwarted preventative health measures.

CSIRO's communications unit has lost a great deal of credibility since Julian Cribb, a former science journalist with *The Australian*, oversaw the highly regarded National Awareness Program until its axing in June 2001. Last October *Australasian Science* published an evaluation of CSIRO's media releases from the previous 12 months. While 30% promoted unpublished technological claims that can only be substantiated in hindsight, only 4% announced the publication of original research in peer-reviewed journals.

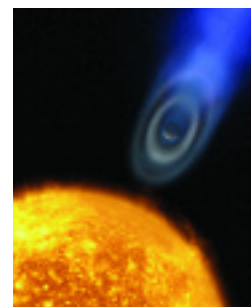
However, this trend is not limited to the merchants of spin. A study of newspaper stories published 10 years ago in the *Sydney Morning Herald* found that half of all cancer "breakthroughs" reported had not lived up to the hype (see pp.39–40).

None of this fares well for public trust in science. In the United Kingdom, mismanagement of an outbreak of mad cow disease has fuelled mistrust of information about genetically modified foods (see p.41). Indeed, a recent survey by Biotechnology Australia has found that local acceptance of genetically modified foods and medicines decreased between 2001 and 2003 (see p.10).

It's unlikely that trust in science can improve in Australia when public comment from the premier scientific research organisation is filtered by a manager who has used science to put corporate interests ahead of community health.

ABOUT THE COVER

Oxygen and carbon have been detected in the atmosphere of a planet beyond our solar system for the first time. Oxygen is a possible indicator for extra-terrestrial life, although scientists say that conditions on the extrasolar planet HD 209458b could not sustain life. However, Yeshe Fenner has narrowed the "galactic habitable zone" to a "postcode" within the Milky Way where life is most likely to exist (see pp.14–16).



European Space Agency /Alfred Vidal-Madjar