

Australasian Science

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This month marks the second anniversary of a *conScience* column in *Australasian Science* in which Dr Max Whitten, the former Chief of CSIRO Entomology, made a stinging attack on CSIRO's leadership (*AS*, July 2002, p.16). Whitten likened CSIRO's Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett, to ousted Australian Broadcasting Corporation Managing Director Jonathan Shier, quoting from a speech in which Garrett outlined the philosophy behind his plans for CSIRO: "If it ain't broke, break it".

Since Whitten's column was published *Australasian Science* has been critical of several aspects of CSIRO under Garrett. While we have always sought responses to these criticisms, Garrett has remained elusive.

For example, a face-to-face interview with *Australasian Science* on 21 August 2002 proved farcical when Garrett agreed after 90 minutes to only answer questions provided in advance via email. Even then, answers were not provided after several weeks and the process was abandoned (*AS*, October 2002, p.45). Garrett has also frustrated Senate Estimates hearings by consistently delaying answers to dozens of questions on notice.

Australasian Science's list of unanswered questions continues to grow, but now Garrett has given up on the illusion of cooperation. In response to the publication of an article questioning the appointment of former tobacco lobbyist Donna Staunton as CSIRO's Director of Communications (*AS*, April 2004, pp.37-38), Garrett and his Deputy, Dr Ron Sandland, have told *Australasian Science* that they will not respond to this magazine's questions.

Sandland took exception to the cartoon accompanying the article, which depicted CSIRO in bed with a cigarette (see p.45). He must not have known that Staunton had already requested a copy of the cartoon to hang on her wall.

But Sandland was unable to defend the substance of *Australasian Science's* criticisms. Indeed CSIRO's only retort came in a Senate Estimates hearing, when he asserted that Staunton has publicly renounced statements she made that nicotine is not addictive. However, the only evidence of this that CSIRO could produce was a private letter she wrote to anti-smoking campaigner Prof Simon Chapman (see pp.12-13).

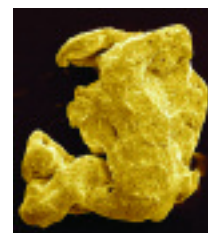
Australasian Science maintains that Staunton is inappropriate for the position. With no experience in science and its communication, her appointment is a tacit endorsement by CSIRO of the tobacco industry, and signals that CSIRO values the methods she used to put the interests of the tobacco industry ahead of public health. Her employment undermines public trust in CSIRO's scientists and the credibility of CSIRO's new Preventative Health Flagship.

The decision to stonewall a publication that dares question CSIRO is churlish. Since Whitten's article was published 2 years ago *Australasian Science* has given CSIRO's leaders every opportunity to answer criticisms raised against them. So far they have not challenged these criticisms publicly.

CSIRO is a public entity and is ultimately answerable to the public. It is disappointing that its leadership is avoiding its public responsibilities by stonewalling media outlets that raise criticisms of its leadership.

ABOUT THE COVER

A coloured scanning electron image of a gold flake panned from soil in the Palmer River goldfields in northern Queensland. Microorganisms play a fundamental role in the transport of gold in the soil and the accumulation of gold nuggets (see pp.23-25).



Frank Reith, ANU