

NURSES TURN THE TABLES ON THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY

Just as New Zealand was among world leaders with its smokefree legislation, it could also be the first country with an entire nursing workforce dedicated to stubbing out cigarettes. Nursing organisations are urging the government to enlist the country's over 40,000 nurses to help reduce smoking rates.

Soon, Smokefree Nurses Aotearoa/New Zealand (SNANZ) will take the proposal to the Māori Affairs Select Committee inquiry into the tobacco industry. SNANZ Director **Grace Wong** explains why nurses are lining up to help and observes there's a certain irony in them uniting against the tobacco industry.

Nurses see first-hand, on a daily basis, the terrible toll smoking has on our patients, their whānau and the wider community. That's why we are in an ideal position to help. Research shows that advice and support from nursing staff can increase people's success in quitting smoking, especially in a hospital setting. Significantly, we see the potential for Māori nurses to dramatically improve the quit rates amongst Māori, who bear the greatest burden of ill health and death caused by smoking.

A recent smoking and nursing survey conducted by the Auckland University of Technology and Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) found that nine out of 10 nurses felt it was part of their responsibility to advise clients to stop smoking and most said they'd happily spend an extra five minutes with each patient who smoked if they could effectively intervene. Nursing organisations want to support nurses to do this and to see smoking cessation advice and support as part of their daily practice.

We know nurses are very keen to do this work but they lack the time and support in the workplace. We want smoking cessation training taught in all our nursing schools and for nurses to be able to offer cessation advice as well as supporting smokers on their quitting journey.

Thousands of nurses have already completed free training courses to give them greater confidence in approaching smokers under their care and offering them help to quit. These nurses can now also issue vouchers for subsidised nicotine replacement therapy to anyone who smokes. This is world-leading and shows the strong role New Zealand nursing organisations and the Ministry of Health are playing in equipping and empowering nurses as frontline educators.

While nurses now actively support the smokefree message, that hasn't always been the case. At one time our profession was blatantly used by the tobacco industry to promote its products.

As bizarre as it seems now, from around 1920 to 1950, nurses were shown handing out cigarettes to soldiers and even smoking themselves while personally endorsing the medicinal qualities of certain brands.

One ad shows a smiling, rosy-cheeked nurse smoking a *Camel* cigarette and promoting its freshness. The text reads, "You like them fresh? So do I!" By using such images the ads were intended to provide "evidence" that cigarette smoking was supported by medical professionals (there are countless ads featuring doctors as well) and to imply various health benefits from smoking, such as weight loss, relaxation and pleasure.

Knowing what we know now, it is unthinkable that nurses were once enlisted in tobacco industry propaganda but it seems there is no limit to the inventive ways the tobacco industry has come up with to sanitise and normalise its toxic products.



Those products are still blighting the lives of many New Zealanders, with Māori smoking rates unacceptably high, and this is where Māori nurses can make a significant difference.

We acknowledge, however, that as well as addressing smoking in the wider community we also need to address it within our workforce. A number of nurses still smoke and often feel they face more criticism than most over their addiction. As a priority SNANZ wants targeted national programmes to help health professionals who smoke to quit. It also wants nurses to be given more time and workplace support to help smokers quit.

We believe a unified nursing profession taking the smokefree message to the wards, clinics, workplaces, schools and homes will be a powerful force in further reducing New Zealand's 5000 a year death toll from smoking.

It will also be a long-overdue rebuke to the tobacco industry for once trading on our trustworthiness and credibility to sell its toxic products.