

Interview with Oliver Driver

Interview by Dave Gibson

How would you describe your current smoking status?

Smoker.

Do you think smoking is as common now as it used to be?

No, I don't think smoking is as common as it used to be but I think it's as easy to get to as it used to be. I think it's as accessible as it always has been and I think that's one of the major problems with it. The thing that annoys me is the fact that Billy who is 14 and lives in Takapuna can see it and have access to it everywhere and goes in to a dairy where you buy pies and chips and drinks and there are 52 colourful displays standing in front of him. Our government and everybody else allows children and teenagers to buy packets of poison that will have no other effect but to make them addicted to a drug that will eventually kill them. You know that to me is ludicrous and when you actually think about it objectively it's impossible to justify.

How do you as a government or as a health ministry justify banning all of these drugs that cause some harm and possible death but this one drug that guarantees harm and death we're not going to ban that one. In fact, we are not only not going to ban it we're going to allow you to package it in various ways, put different names and labels on it, and display it in places where we sell food. There shouldn't be smoking sections in public places, there shouldn't be arguments about whether we have smoking, we don't have heroin injecting sections. It should be prescription. You should go to your doctor and get your prescription for your tobacco and then go to the chemist and get 200 white cigarettes in a plain cardboard box with no labels on it and sit there and smoke it. Can you imagine if party pills were killing 4500 people a year? We would murder the dealers. The government bans party pills but not tobacco, where's the logic in that? Party pills kills one person a year, tobacco kills 4500, which would you ban? My problem is that I smoke and I would like to stop and I stopped for five years and I am going to, I've stopped before and I am going to try and stop again.

What do you think of point of sale tobacco displays in dairies, supermarkets etc.?

It's madness, there is no justification for being able to sell packaged poison in food outlets. I have asked John Key personally and you've got the government saying there is not enough proof to show that if you removed point of sale advertising, point of sale displays the amount of people smoking would reduce and yet that makes no logical sense because point of sale advertising works, that's why we have point of sale advertising. The reason toffee pops pays extra at Woolworths to get the toffee pops at your eye level is because we see it and we buy it, that's marketing 101. Put the product in front of the person and the person will buy it, so

you can't with one hand say point of sale advertising works and then with the other hand go, 'But there is no proof to say if you remove point of sale advertising it will drop'.

The proof is in a billion dollar advertising industry.

The proof is in how much the tobacco companies want us to keep it. If it made no difference, why would anybody have a problem? In fact, if it makes no difference, why does anybody have a problem? I mean if there are 40,000 people signing signatures saying, 'Let's remove point of sale advertising', if every major health industry in the country, every health board and every kind of health association is saying 'remove it', why wouldn't you? It's not going to cost us anything. It's not going to cost the government one cent you know. We put pornographic material behind plastic bags with the titties blocked off but poison right in front of your face kids, next to the lighters.

So what are your thoughts on the tobacco industry?

The tobacco industry you can't blame. You can be morally disgusted by it. You can be ethically upset or ethically amazed at the people who work in the tobacco industry who can somehow justify continuing to sell poison in various colours and packages to make them attractive to people. Now that to me is ethically wrong. I couldn't sell poison to kids or to adults. I couldn't fundamentally do it but you can't blame them because it's legal and anything we make legal that will make profit will be done. That's understandable, that's business. You can't have a free market, you can't have a capitalist society that then tries to restrict people's sale of legal things but the government, the government you can blame fully because that's the government's job. It's not about getting people to quit, it's about making it so that people would never think of starting. That's the biggest issue and at the moment I don't see it in movies any more and I don't really see it on the TV any more and I don't see adverts for it any more and I don't see it at sports games any more so where do I see it? I see it at the dairy, that's the only place I see it and the tobacco companies know that's the only place I see it and so they make the displays bigger and bigger. They go to the local dairy owner and they go, 'We'll pay for your whole shop front. We'll buy you a new till and we will put in a new counter. You just do this' and it's wrong. If the argument is tobacco has been around for so long that it's impossible to put it into prohibition then remove the branding and the distinction and make it government-provided, prescription medicine or a prescription drug. Make it that, take away their ability to profit out of it cause there is no justification for why we should allow people to profit off death.

If I am the government and tobacco costs me, that's what they say, we don't make any profit out of the taxes because it costs more in the health department, in the hospitals than it does out of profit so we aint doing it for profit and there's the Cancer Society and there is the Nurses Society and all these health societies saying, 'Get rid of the point of displays' and there are tens of thousands of New Zealanders signing petitions and going to the effort to say, 'Get rid of the point of sale displays' and there is all of this evidence and tests that show that point of sale display advertising encourages and promotes smoking and yet as a government,

they decide, 'No we're not going to do that thing which will cost us nothing', there must be a reason for it you know? The more generous of us say that the reason for that is because the government truly believes in freedom of choice on this one poison but not on all these other poisons, and the most disingenuous say that there are lobby groups that give donations to political parties in order to get in to power, you know there must be.

What are your thoughts on young people seeing their role models smoking and taking up smoking themselves as a result?

Role models are important but I don't smoke because movie stars smoke. I smoke because my dad smoked you know? And that was the first brand I smoked was dad's brand and you might smoke because your mates smoke. It's a continual association thing and it was an acceptable thing. I think roles models are important. I look back at the amount of times I've sat outside theatres where there have been young kids and young actors smoking away and wondered how many of them have thought, 'He smokes, I'd like to smoke too' and I am eternally upset about that and the times when I used to think it was cool, sitting there thinking I was amazing while I was doing it. What we're beginning to get is that smoking is unacceptable. You have to go outside and do it, you have to go over there, you have to go and lurk in a corner and have a cigarette round the side of the building and can you keep going, go a bit further please. You know every country in the world that bans it from public places there is a huge protest and then everybody goes, 'Oh actually it's quite good.'

But you go in to any dairy and you are going to see sweets, look above the counter you are going to see chocolate bars, look to the left of the counter you are going to see ice cream, look to the right of the counter you are going to see chips, look straight ahead of you, you're going to see things that are the same colour, I mean how do you teach a kid that this poisons you but if you want to buy it it's here where all the yummy stuff? I think kids walk in to those stores and they go, 'It can't be that bad.'

What do you think the government should do?

I think the government should put the cigarettes with all the other medicines and all the other poisons into the hands of health professionals. I think that you should buy it from a chemist. I think the government should explain why we are allowed to sell poison in dairies.

What do you think about nicotine replacement products such as gum, lozenges, and patches?

I don't know how I feel about nicotine replacement therapy because I've given up and I gave up using the Alan Carr Easy Way To Stop Smoking and when you do that, all the nicotine goes out of your body in three days and it's akin to having a slight feeling of hunger, so the actual giving up of the nicotine for me wasn't hard. I can give up nicotine today, tomorrow, that's not the problem. The problem for me is the habit and the sociality and all the other

things that I associate that drug with. I think we will eventually stop smoking as a society. I think smoking will eventually stop, we will look back at this society in 100-200 years time and laugh and be like, 'Oh you what? You sold it where? Dumb. You're mental.' Kids will go, 'Really? They used to sell poison and people could roll it up and burn it and inhale it? What did it do for them? Nothing?'

Patches should be free and all that stuff should be available, anything that you need, Quitline, all of that stuff should be fully available to anybody who is trying to quit. The big problem is the millions of people who have not yet started and those are they're the ones you have to worry about.

So you've quit before?

Yeah and I will quit again but it's hard you know? It's an incredibly hard thing to give up because your brain fights against it. The way that nicotine works in your brain is that nicotine dictates, 'you need it, you need this, you've got to have it and the trouble is we smokers, we all flock together and we all go, 'Oh you still smoke? Yeah mate' and we all kind of go, 'Oh well if Craig is still doing it then it's alright then', and we know that it's not, you know? But we're like this desperate dying few that kind of lurk together. I think if you had to go to the chemist with your prescription and get your 200 in a blank box, I think I would go, 'That's just lame, I'm not a drug addict.'

Do you have any advice for people who are trying to quit?

I would seriously say the best way to stop smoking is to read Alan Carr's Easy Way To Stop Smoking and never pick up that cigarette again. I stopped for five years without a problem and then one day I went, 'I'm alright' and had another one but I think that's what I recommend to other people and I need to read that book again and try and trick myself into thinking that I didn't go back in to it. You can't pressure people and you can't bully people and you can't be smug about it. We know it's going to kill us, we know it makes our teeth yellow, we know, we look at the photos, so all of that doesn't work. You just have to remind people of others who have stopped and how easy it is, that it's not that hard. That's the trick about it isn't it? That's the trickiest thing is that it's not that hard to stop.