



Warning: This exhibition could be addictive

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TOBACCO companies were always going to be sensitive to critical publicity. Even so museum curator Inara Waldon was surprised to find her exhibition threatened with legal action for merely reporting a historical event.

That event was the activities of the anti-tobacco and alcohol advertising activists calling themselves BUGA UP. The name stood for Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions and the group was active, mainly in Melbourne and Sydney from the 1970s to the early 1990s.

They were a thorn in the side of the tobacco and liquor industries and those who advertised their products, when they defaced or as they would claim "refaced" advertising.

Waldon says that some of the **BUGA UP** leading lights have gone on to greater things. Arthur Chesterfield Evans, a surgeon who became a Democrats member of NSW parliament from 1998 until last year, was convicted of defacing a Rothmans billboard but released on appeal. Another Sydney BUGA UP alumni is Simon Chapman, now professor of public health at Sydney University and still a leading critic of tobacco companies.

Waldon is the research force behind an exhibition at the Melbourne Museum entitled, Drugs: A Social History. She makes the point that while high-profile illegal drugs such as heroin and ecstasy are top of our hierarchy of social bogies, it is the legal ones such as tobacco and alcohol that kill more Australians and do more social damage.

Indeed, one of the exhibition's themes is to trace the history of which substances are tolerated and which are not.

Patrons to the display might be surprised to learn heroin was administered by doctors in Australia as late as the 1950s to control pain in conditions ranging from cancer to childbirth.

When it was banned there was a medical outcry."

It is not drugs that are evil but the way we abuse or misuse them," she says.

In the 1930s through to the early '70s, Australia was in the grip of a different white powder epidemic to that causing concern these days. It was characterised in the play *A Cup of Tea, A Bex and a Good Lie Down*, which ran in Sydney for many years, satirising the mid-20th century Australian housewife's drug of choice.

Bex and its analgesic rival Vincent's contained a combination of aspirin, phenacetin and caffeine and were known as mother's little helpers.

Waldon said the caffeine made the combination highly addictive but it was the synthetic analgesic phenacetin that caused most problems. In this combination, it was discovered to be carcinogenic and responsible for kidney and liver failure.

Bex and Vincent's were sold over the counter not only without prescription but in corner stores. Such was their addictiveness that some users were consuming 50 powders a day.

Australians were the biggest users of this drug combination in the world and Newcastle, NSW, was the epicentre to such an extent that the affliction became known as the Newcastle Disease.

Even with our predisposition for this kind of addiction, Waldon emphasises that Australia has led the world in progressively dealing with problems caused by drug abuse."

We have led the world in drug-harm minimisation programs. Unlike the US, which has treated drug misuse primarily as a criminal matter, we have taken a more balanced approach with things such as needle and syringe exchange which have had a profound impact on HIV/AIDS infection," Waldon says."

In the years since we have done this there has been an 18.6% reduction in the infection rates compared with the US where over the corresponding period there has been an 18.1% increase."

This means that over 10 years we have had 25,000 fewer people with HIV and hepatitis C."

She said we have also led the world in our campaigns against smoking and alcohol abuse, such as the Quit for Life campaign starting in 1980 and random breath-testing for alcohol and drugs.

The exhibition features both legal and illegal drugs as well as the paraphernalia relating to tobacco, alcohol, analgesics, cannabis, opiates, ecstasy, cocaine, LSD and amphetamines.

Waldon said the litigation threat from a tobacco company (which she won't name) was examined by her museum's lawyers and the company was told the exhibition would go ahead as planned."

It was around the time of the Rolah McCabe case (the 51-yearold Cranbourne grandmother who became the first Australian to successfully sue a tobacco company before she died of cancer). They probably decided they did not want to stir up any more publicity by pursuing us."

Drugs: A Social History, at Melbourne Museum until October 5. Free with museum entry.