

Outcry over 'wowserism' taunt to anti-smokers

By MARK METHERELL,
medical reporter

The editor of the 'Medical Journal of Australia', Dr Alister Brass, has enraged anti-smoking campaigners by advising them to "cut out the self-righteous wowserism".

A letter from the director of the Victorian Anti-Cancer Council, Dr Nigel Gray, in the issue of the journal published today, says: "From which cave shambled this Alister Brass, who appears to be the editor of the journal and who denigrates so profoundly the long-term commitment to preventive medicine . . . ?"

A researcher of tobacco advertising, Mr Simon Chapman, wrote that the offending article, 'Smoke gets in your eyes', by Dr Brass, "was probably the most contemptible piece of commentary ever to have disgraced the pages of a medical journal with pretensions to responsibility".

Another letter, signed by seven executives of the National Heart

Foundation, said that Dr Brass, by using in his article such loaded words as "denouncing tobacco" and "puritanism", set a note "of superficiality and insensitivity that seriously calls into question his own judgment and credibility".

The chairman of the ACT Cancer Society, Dr W. M. Burch, wrote that it was incredible that Dr Brass would use an issue as serious as that of smoking and ill-health "to indulge his undoubted Thurberesque skills and snipe at anti-smokers".

Dr Brass said yesterday that he was surprised at the "holy war" which had erupted over what he described as "a fairly light-hearted attempt to provoke a few people".

He said: "I'm surprised at the volume of abuse . . . it's opened my eyes to the hypersensitivity of many first-rate physicians . . . the letters are still pouring in."

The furore is over a commentary by Dr Brass on a research

article by Mr Chapman in the journal last month dealing with tobacco advertising and what he called editorial bias in Australian newspapers.

Mr Chapman's article, headlined 'Not biting the hand that feeds you', said that research of editorials had shown that in Australian newspapers there was overwhelming opposition to the banning of tobacco advertising — "a source of unknown, but obviously substantial revenue".

But in his commentary, Dr Brass said the role of advertising in maintaining people's interest in cigarettes was much overrated. "So is the alleged wickedness of capitalist tobacco companies," he said.

"Reformers need to be very careful that they don't crush an individual's right (to be foolish even) in the name of 'higher truth'. So why not simply keep the medical facts on smoking in the public eye, but cut out the self-righteous wowserism?"