

# TRANSCRIPT

Monday, 24 June 2024

## Transcript: AMA President Professor Steve Robson interview on ABC News Radio with Thomas Oriti

### Subject: National Party's position on vaping legislation

**QUESTION:** Australia's peak doctors' body, the Australian Medical Association, is targeting the leader of the Nationals, accusing him of favouring Big Tobacco over the health of Australians. In a letter to David Littleproud, AMA President Steve Robson is calling out a Nationals proposal to treat vapes like traditional cigarettes, where they would be available in stores, but they'd be subject to things like plain packaging and higher taxes. Worth noting, we have put in a request to speak with David Littleproud, the Nationals leader, this morning. We have been told he is not available.

The government has so far made vapes prescription only. It's banned the importation, giving retailers a window to sell down their stocks. Steve Robson's letter comes as the Senate prepares to debate the final tranche of the government's anti-vaping policy, which will ban their sale at shop counters. The Nationals — and as I say, we have tried to reach out to David Littleproud this morning. We've been told he's not available to chat. But the Nationals claim 'hang on, if you do this, nearly \$2 billion a year could be raised through a tax on vapes'. What's your issue with that?

**STEVE ROBSON:** Well, I think it's a total false economy. In fact, first of all, we've seen reports this morning that the amount of revenue that's raised from taxation of vapes in the US was feeble, it was minimal. And if we look at the situation with cigarettes in Australia, and this is the, I guess, the model the Nats are hoping to follow, the amount of excise raised from cigarette and tobacco sales in Australia every year is about \$13 billion. But the cost of the harm from tobacco and tobacco smoking is \$140 billion. So essentially, for every dollar raised, \$10 has to be spent mopping up the harm of tobacco. And we think vapes are going to be exactly the same, so it makes no economic sense whatsoever, Tom.

**QUESTION:** I want to go into more of the Nationals' proposal in a moment, Steve. But just on what you said there, what kind of a burden on the health system do you anticipate from a generation of vapers? There's often this idea that at least it's a more favourable alternative to smoking traditional cigarettes, I'll put it that way.

**STEVE ROBSON:** E-cigarettes were developed as a very short-term harm reduction tool to help people who just couldn't quit cigarettes in any other way, temporarily in that transition to stopping using anything at all. But what's happened is because the nicotine is so incredibly addictive, we have an entire and exploding generation of young Australians utterly dependent on vapes. And we know that the steam in vapes has formaldehyde, it's got antifreeze, it's got embalming fluid, all of these incredibly harmful chemicals that we see. I mean, all of us see young kids around the country inhaling this steam non-stop, all the time. It is an evolving public health catastrophe. And the very idea of making profit from this is just crazy, Tom.

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**QUESTION:** I mean, anecdotally, and I guess it's the same argument with the pill testing as well, right? Young people are still vaping anyway. They're going to do it. Has the prescription model worked so far? What does this uptake look like from where you stand?

**STEVE ROBSON:** The prescription model has not been given a chance, and in fact changes have only been in for a few months. Every Australian knows looking around at just what a catastrophe vaping is in young Australians, and we have a very short window to do something about it at the moment. All of the laws that have been in the states and territories about not selling vaping products to people under the age of 18 have utterly failed because kids can get them easily, or older people just give them to kids. And the signal is that in some way, vaping is harmless, and nothing could be further from the truth. So, policies that promote it are just harmful and they're a false economy, and they don't appreciate that we've got a window to do something great and help young Australians.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, I guess the idea, though — I mean, if young people are going to do it anyway, is it not — with respect — is it not worth the government making some money off it, which can then go back into servicing the health system? I don't want to sound like I'm advocating for vapes, but the reality is young people are going to do this stuff. As I said, it's the same argument with pill testing. They're going to probably take it anyway.

**STEVE ROBSON:** Well, I disagree with you completely. One of the big problems at the moment is vapes have all of these flavours in them. They're packaged and directly marketed to kids. That will go. They'll just be plain, unflavoured steam that's treated as a medical product, which is what they're intended to be. I mean, nobody says we should make codeine freely available to everybody, because people are going to take it anyway. I think that's an argument that, with respect to you, really is promoting the harm. And I think we have to see that we've got this opportunity to put e-cigarettes where they're meant to be: a temporary way of helping smokers who can't quit any other way, quit. And then you finish the vaping, and that's just not happening at the moment.

**QUESTION:** I guess, though, just feeding into what I was saying, there's this argument of incentivising a black market trading in vapes, right? If the cost goes up or the regulations are there, people try to buy it for cheaper elsewhere and under the table. I mean, it sounds like either way, if you ban them or you push the cost up, there is still going to be a black market.

**STEVE ROBSON:** I don't think we should just lie down and give up. I just think we've got an opportunity, and I think every peak public health body in this country supports the legislation. We were all involved in helping draft it. And I think the idea that we just lie down and say, 'oh well, I give up' — that's the worst possible approach. And I think we will never be able to live with ourselves if we just give in, Tom.

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