

# Hysterical reaction to vaccination study an attack on academic freedom

*Critics take bits out of context, ignoring the central theme*

**BRIAN MARTIN**

I was the principal supervisor for Judy Wilyman, who recently received her PhD from the University of Wollongong. The reaction to news of her graduation, much of it bordering on hysteria, suggests that understanding of and commitment to academic freedom in Australia is more tenuous than I had imagined.

In the late 1970s, I first began studying suppression of dissent,

cataloguing cases in which environmental researchers or teachers were targeted.

In the following decades I studied attacks on dissent in a number of scientific controversies, including nuclear power, pesticides and fluoridation.

The usual pattern is that someone with qualifications or credibility threatens common beliefs or vested interests through their research or public comment, and then comes under attack.

Methods include public denunciation, censorship of publications, denial of research grants, expulsion from professional associations and dismissal.

The reason for targeting technical experts is they puncture the

apparent unanimity of expert opinion in a controversy. Citizen campaigners are usually left alone.

With this background, I became aware of attacks on dissent in the Australian vaccination controversy.

As in many other countries, critics of vaccination had remained marginal given the overwhelming support for vaccination among researchers, medical associations and health departments.

The most prominent vaccine-critical group in Australia was the AVN, the Australian Vaccination-skeptics Network. In 2010, an opponent group, SAVN, Stop the Australian (Anti) Vaccination Network, set itself the task of destroying the AVN, using a variety

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of techniques, including unsupported claims, verbal abuse and numerous complaints to official bodies.

Personally I do not have strong views about vaccination, but felt it worthwhile to enter the debate to defend free speech. In my studies of suppression of dissent, never before had I seen such a sustained and abusive attack on citizen critics of a public policy.

SAVN sought to censor or demoralise anyone who publicly criti-

cised vaccination. Many parents with reservations became reluctant to voice their views for fear of SAVN's response.

It so happened that before SAVN's emergence, I had become a supervisor for Judy, who is a critic of the Australian government's vaccination policy. Because she went public with some of her criticisms, she became a side target for SAVN. Their actions included abusive comment and complaints to the university.

Therefore I anticipated that Judy's graduation would generate hostility.

In a piece I posted to coincide with announcement of her graduation, I wrote that when people criticise a research student's work,

it is worth checking for telltale signs indicating when these are not genuine concerns about quality and probity but instead part of a campaign to denigrate viewpoints they oppose.

First, they attack the person, not just their work. Second, they concentrate on alleged flaws in the work, focusing on small details and ignoring the central points.

Third, they make no comparisons with other students or theses or with standard practice, but rather make criticisms in isolation or according to their own assumed standards.

Fourth, they assume that findings contrary to what they believe is correct must be wrong or dangerous, or both.

Most of the recent attacks on Judy's thesis exhibit one or more of these signs.

Within a day of her thesis becoming available online, opponents had taken a few sentences out of context and used them to create a misleading narrative, meanwhile ignoring the central themes in her thesis.

Opponents, following SAVN's line that open criticism of vaccination policy should be censored, have condemned the thesis, questioned my supervision and the expertise of the thesis examiners, and condemned the university for allowing the thesis to proceed.

I was not all that surprised, since for years Judy's opponents had been condemning her thesis

before it was completed. Apparently they did not need evidence to declare it deficient. Likewise, many people lacking evidence about my supervision and the operation of university procedures surprisingly feel entitled to pass adverse judgment.

I believe it is worthwhile for vaccination issues to be publicly discussed, without censorship of dissident views. SAVN and others apparently believe otherwise.

I am proud that the University of Wollongong has taken such a strong stand in support of academic freedom.

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