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Legal action study underway and calls for age of tobacco purchases to be raised to 21

In a bid to prevent, and compensate, Australian smokers from extreme and unnecessary suffering and death, the Minderoo Foundation, has called on the Federal and State Governments to stop young people from supporting Big Tobacco companies until they are at least 21.

The Foundation Chairman and co-founder, Mr Andrew Forrest AO with his wife Nicola, said today Big Tobacco must, financially, be held to account for the suffering they cause Australians.

"We understand that Big Tobacco is more cunning than a gold tooth rat. That's why they're still here," Mr Forrest said. "That's why this killer of innocent people, by the thousands, is still raking in huge profits. They will now quietly start briefing public relations agents, funding desperate political parties, funding small Australian retailers, newsagents, even parts of the medical industry to divide opinion, cause confusion, and therefore maintain their deathly, to the customers but highly profitable to them, status quo."

This significant step-change in health policy was presented by Mr. Andrew Forrest AO and other founding board members of the Eliminate Cancer Initiative (ECI), to the Federal Health Minister and his state counterparts, at a recent meeting of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

Mr Forrest said, the central role of governments is to preserve life and enable its citizens to lead healthy happy lives. To do this, a strong economic model is required.

"When tobacco causes many times more cost to the nation than it ever brings in revenue, and creates extreme suffering before palliative care and death, there is something seriously wrong with any government in the world, particularly ours, tolerating it."

In a recent report¹ by Cancer Australia, it was declared that almost one-quarter (22%) of the total cancer burden can be attributed to tobacco use. Each year, smoking kills an estimated 15,000 Australians and costs Australia \$31.5 billion in health and economic costs². This dwarfs the revenue the Commonwealth reaped in tax revenues (just over \$10b in 2016-17) but, more importantly, fails to compensate for the incalculable costs of pain, suffering and loss to patients and families.

Avoiding this massive loss is enough to build, each year, ten very large comprehensive hospitals³ and 20 football stadiums the size of the MCG that hosted the Grand final on Saturday.

"It is an economic malfunction, on every single person in Australia that their government allows an industry to continue to cause it more in massive financial loss – due to the burden of chronic health disease – than it does in revenue," Mr Forrest said. "And this is before you even consider the agony to families across Australia as they watch their loved ones waste away in pain to a slow death."

Mr. Forrest said if Australia's future, our youth, continue to take up smoking, it will be families who have to support them through a chronic illness, cancer and, eventually, palliative care - the final journey of a Big Tobacco customer.

"We need to stop fuelling Big Tobacco preying on our vulnerable youth. We know that once young people have hit 18, many will not have made up their minds to smoke or not." Mr Forrest said. "Nearly 90% of adult smokers start as children. By the time they reach 21, they are hooked and become lifelong customers of Big Tobacco." Mr Forrest said.

¹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/burden-of-disease/burden-of-cancer-in-australia-australian-burden-of-disease-study-2011/contents/table-of-contents>

² <http://www.health.gov.au/tobacco>

³ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/state-politics/new-adelaide-hospital-to-cost-sa-taxpayers-12bn/news-story/211f0a32a6fc2d43b955c92c52a01c5c>



Dr Ronald A. DePinho, M.D., past president of MD Anderson Cancer Center and an executive director of ECI, said Australia has an historic opportunity to, once again, inspire the world with a comprehensive effort including Tobacco 21 legislation.

“Tobacco 21 is a child health issue that must be addressed with urgency, as hundreds of Australian children experiment with tobacco products every day,” Dr DePinho said.

The ECI, through the Minderoo Foundation, received the first \$75 million in funding from philanthropists Andrew and Nicola Forrest, to use as planning capital to reward collaboration across the global cancer community and to accelerate research breakthroughs and improve prevention, detection and treatment including access to lifesaving clinical trials.

Part of this funding will be used to launch an assault on the tobacco epidemic by making Big Tobacco accountable to Australian smokers and taxpayers, for the incredible suffering and loss of life and by bringing Big Tobacco to account for being the greatest cause of cancer deaths. ENDS

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