



Political Donations Inquiry
Heart Foundation Northern Territory Submission

Background

For over 30 years the Heart Foundation Northern Territory has been working to improve the health and wellbeing of Territorians. We are committed to health equity and place a special focus on people who are disproportionately affected by heart disease: people who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, residents of regional and remote areas and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We do this under the guidance of our strategic plan.

Territorians experience the worst health outcomes of all Australians. The Northern Territory (NT) has the highest rates of coronary heart disease mortality and heart related hospital admissions in Australia. The NT outback has the highest rate of heart-related hospital admissions being almost five times higher than the more affluent suburbs of North Sydney. Additionally, the Northern Territory has the highest smoking rates at 22% in the general population 56% in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. Smoking is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease and approximately 40% of the people who die from smoking die from cardiovascular disease – that is heart, stroke and blood vessel disease. The rate of cardiovascular disease deaths for the Indigenous population in the NT since 1980 has continued to rise, whilst there have been significant falls for the non-Indigenous population in the NT and for Australia overall.

The Northern Territory Division has a strong history of local advocacy through its role as a leader in heart health for all Territorians, improving health outcomes through our partnerships with the Northern Territory Government, local governments, Chronic Disease Network, Cardiac Network, and the Good Health Alliance of the Northern Territory. We have a firm commitment to reduce tobacco use amongst Territorians. Local advocacy is vital to improving heart health for Territorians and ensuring fair and equitable access to cardiac services throughout the Northern Territory.

Discussion

The lack of transparency around political donations from tobacco companies and organisations who have affiliations with tobacco companies is of great concern to the Heart Foundation. Of particular concern, is the influence that large donors may have in policy formation. The Northern Territory Government has failed to address the ongoing issue of the influence of big tobacco over the political system. The failure of consecutive Northern Territory Government's to divest public monies from tobacco and tobacco related industries has seen the Northern Territory maintain the highest smoking levels in Australia and win the dubious Dirty Ashtray Award eleven times. The Northern Territory is one of the last jurisdictions to divest in tobacco and publicly declare a position on this issue.

Australia is a signatory to the World Health Organisation (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control which outlines how governments should implement public health policies regarding tobacco control, so they are capable of affecting change. Prior to the 2012 Northern Territory election, the Australian Hoteliers Association (AHA) provided both major political parties with large donations. On the surface this donation may look as though it has little interference from big tobacco, however, British American Tobacco are a corporate sponsor of the AHA. Following this election, the Country Liberal Party weakened tobacco control legislation, specifically around smoking in eating areas of licenced venues. The influence that organisations such as the AHA have over public health policy is of great concern to the Heart Foundation and in contradiction to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

The inquiry into political donations presents an opportunity for the Northern Territory Government to introduce measures to limit the influence of the tobacco industry over public health policy. The health and wellbeing of Territorians depends on a government that is partial and free from influence. The Heart Foundation Northern Territory fully supports and welcomes any measures to lead a generational change in tobacco control in the Northern Territory.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

- Political parties of the Northern Territory will not accept donations from any source where a reputable evidence-base shows that the intent or focus of its work may have a negative impact on population health.

Recommendation 2:

- Political parties in the Northern Territory will not accept donations from organisations who have relationships with commercial organisations which reputable evidence-base shows that the intent or focus of its work may have a negative impact on population health.

Recommendation 3:

- Political parties in the Northern Territory will not accept donations from organisations that would foreseeably support or create health inequities.