

Lobby Groups

The Australian Skeptics (www.skeptics.com.au) is a confederation of groups around Australia that advocate for the government's immunisation policy. Subscribers of this confederation refer to all individuals questioning vaccines as "anti-vaxers". This is a misrepresentation of many consumers speaking against the number of vaccines we are now using. Many consumers want choice (without ties to financial entitlements and childcare places or employment) in the number of vaccines we use. I have provided information below on the Australian Skeptics to help consumers understand the context in which information on vaccination is being presented to the public.

The Australian Skeptics

The Australian Skeptics claim to investigate paranormal and pseudoscientific claims. Representatives of the Australian Skeptics use the media and websites to influence public opinion on scientific issues. Subscribers of the Skeptics come from a variety of professions and backgrounds and they publish articles in a non-peer reviewed journal called *The Skeptic*. In 2009 a complaint was made against the Australian Vaccination Network (AVN), by a Skeptic subscriber, Ken McLeod, a retired air-traffic controller. Details of this complaint are listed below. The Australian Skeptics provided him with the Thornett award and \$1,000 for his efforts in complaining about this consumer group (the AVN) to the NSW Health Care Complaints Committee (HCCC).

The Complaint made against the AVN:

In 2009, a subscriber of the Canberra Skeptics, Ken McLeod, made a complaint to the NSW Healthcare Complaints Committee (HCCC) about the AVN - consumers who are concerned about the number of vaccines being recommended by the Australian government. He claimed the AVN was putting out misinformation about vaccines. In August 2009, a prominent subscriber of the Skeptics, Dick Smith, funded an advertisement urging parents to avoid advice from the Australian Vaccination Network and stating that 'the organisation was opposed to vaccination'. This is despite the statements by the AVN that they wanted choice in vaccination

decisions. This advertisement was written by the Australian Skeptic Committee and placed in the Australian newspaper on 6th August, 2009. After this advertisement, the 'Stop the AVN' (SAVN) Facebook friends was established and future advertisements were funded by the SAVN page subscriber and other donors (Eran Segrev, Australian Skeptic president, 2012).

In 2010 Ken McLeod, along with Wendy Wilkinson, received the Skeptics Thornett Award for their campaigns to complain about the AVN to the HCCC. Both recipients received \$1000 from the Australian Skeptics for this award. In the same year, the SAVN group received the Skeptic of the Year award. This award goes to an individual or group who has close ties with the Skeptical movement. In 2012 a 'Stop the AVN' facebook page was established but no individuals were listed as contacts for this group. Anonymity and the use of aliases allow individuals to ridicule and smear researchers/consumers who present information that is against their interests. SAVNer's do not debate the information with arguments they ridicule the individual. The only contact provided for this facebook group is the Young Australian Skeptics www.stopavn.com Professor Brian Martin, my PhD supervisor, has written many articles about the tactics this group uses to suppress the vaccination debate in Australia <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/14savn/>

On the 24 February 2012 (after 2 years), the complaint made to the HCCC against the AVN was thrown out of court. This is because the AVN is a consumer group asking the government to investigate the communities concerns about vaccines. It is not a healthcare provider so it was not in the HCCC's jurisdiction to be able to investigate this group. The AVN represents consumers and health professionals who are concerned about the lack of science supporting the use of multiple vaccines in infants. Therefore it was the duty of the HCCC to act *on behalf* of the AVN and investigate their concerns – not *investigate* them for presenting misinformation to the public. Therefore the complaint made by Ken McLeod (and other Skeptic subscribers) was not upheld in 2012 and the HCCC subsequently sort to widen its jurisdiction (2013) to increase the control of information about vaccines to the public.

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