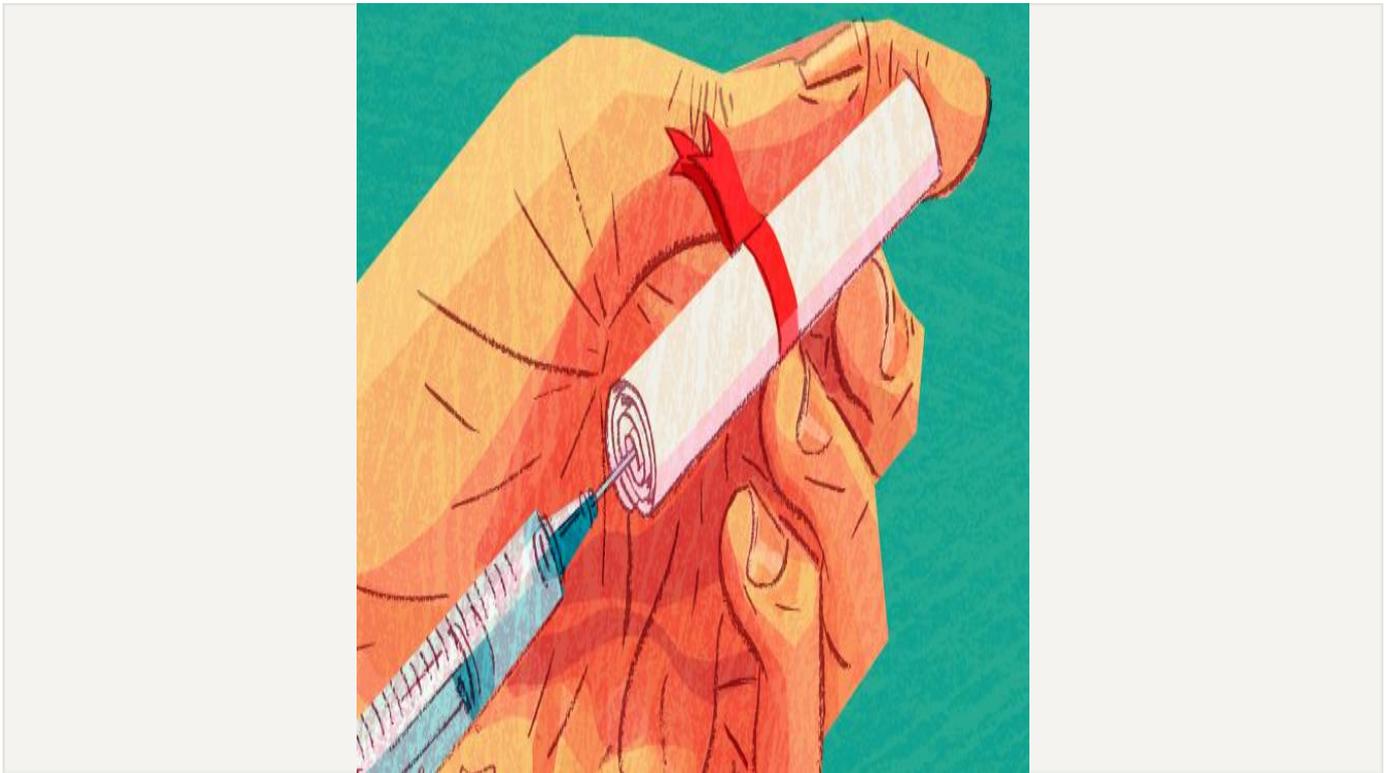


# Wollongong should never have accepted Judy Wilyman's thesis



Artwork: Tom Jellett.

JOHN CUNNINGHAM THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM January 20, 2016

The awarding of a PhD to Judy Wilyman has been slammed by critics from many corners. The thesis, purportedly a critical analysis of the Australian government's rationale for its vaccination policy, was conducted under the supervision of Brian Martin, professor of social sciences at the University of Wollongong.

Wilyman appears to demonstrate such a profound lack of understanding of vaccination and immunology that the thesis is simply not fit for purpose. Making errors that would surely be unacceptable in an undergraduate course, Wilyman also appears to demonstrate a lack of understanding of the principles of vaccination, distort and misrepresent references, and present bizarre conspiracy theories to explain vaccination policy.

Martin has lately written an article in Wilyman's defence, claiming that the criticism is a "clear and direct attack on academic freedom". Rather, Martin and Wilyman need to accept that freedom runs two ways — while they are free to write a thesis, I and others are free to express our opinion and criticise it. Martin, it seems, makes a habit of supervising controversial students and then publishing articles about how poorly their work is received.

As a medical practitioner, I am compelled to exercise my freedom of speech when confronted by dangerous public health misinformation. No one has earned the right not to be

criticised when their misguided opinion may endanger the lives of those around us. And with academic freedom comes responsibility.

Wilyman has been exercising her freedom of speech for some years, sometimes in a cruel and inhumane fashion. In 2012, she wrote that she suspected the parents of a child who died of whooping cough were receiving money from a lobby group to promote vaccination. She requested that her inquiry be passed on to those parents. Read that again, and consider how callous it is.

As you might expect, Wilyman and her “research” have been the subject of some scrutiny for several years. She published much of it in newsletters and on her website prior to submission, and her seemingly flawed understandings were repeatedly pointed out to her. Time and again, she refused to correct these glaring errors.

Several times I wrote to the university expressing concerns about her erroneous interpretations, and each time I was politely ignored. We’ve subsequently learned that she even rejected formal advice from an immunologist. This refusal to fix, and learn from, mistakes is the exact opposite of what legitimate researchers do.

Given that Wilyman’s thesis is grossly flawed, it’s difficult to comprehend the behaviour of the university. In a case of corporate narcissism, it has endorsed her thesis, again claiming that academics have freedom to study any controversial subject they like. While this may be so, even the most controversial research has to adhere to basic standards of evidence and argument. Passing work that fails to meet those standards tarnishes the standards of the university. While the university may or may not endorse Wilyman’s conclusions, it must take responsibility for the conduct of her study and its acceptance of the thesis.

A thesis critical of vaccination may be acceptable if based on a solid understanding of the subject matter. A document based on a mountain of erroneous understandings and flawed conclusions is simply not valid.

It may be better labelled as a work of fiction. It is a thesis written about a fairytale version of vaccination, better suited to the backwater websites of anti-vaccinationists. If the university finds that to be an acceptable standard for the award of its highest degree, that is strange behaviour for an organisation attempting to raise its reputation.

The University of Wollongong has failed several times over. In my view Wilyman did not have adequate supervision from a person qualified to consider and remedy her lack of scientific appreciation of vaccination. Her supervisor admits to taking a passive role in her study and seems to have neglected to prevent her committing fundamental errors. He should not be permitted to use students as a means to push his own erroneous “whistleblower” wagon.

The University of Wollongong has failed its current and past PhD graduates. By demonstrating how low its standards are in accepting a thesis, it has increased the likelihood of other PhDs being tarred with the same brush. It has attempted to spin criticism of Wilyman’s thesis as an attack on academic freedom, but has failed dramatically. The release

of this thesis demonstrates the failings of the university on multiple levels.

The university has failed its students and staff, and has potentially been complicit in one of the worst miscarriages of academic endorsement this country has ever seen.

*John Cunningham is an orthopedic surgeon and spokesman for Stop the AVN.*

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