

## FEARLESS ANALYST

# The smoking scientist

## RAY JOHNSTONE

Scientist, book collector

**Born:** Fremantle, 1943

**Died:** Nedlands, aged 69

Ray Johnstone, a free-thinking scholar and scientist, showed remarkable courage and commitment with his provocations in the anti-smoking debate. To most people, however, he was the impassioned owner of the antiquarian Trinity Arcade Bookshop in Perth.

This outlet was stocked with tomes of such interest and rarity that they were incidentally valuable. Profit was not the sole purpose of the enterprise, evidenced by occasions when Ray removed books from sale to prevent customers from buying them even when shelving in the cramped surrounds already groaned under the weight of volumes of curios, gems and nuggets of knowledge.

The shop occupied a former storage room of the Trinity Arcade elevator operator and was rated Perth's tiniest bookshop, visitors remarking on a quaint vintage character.

Despite its success, Ray made a more memorable mark as a scientific researcher, fearlessly disposed to exposing what he saw as bad science.

This came to a head when he tackled the growing campaign against smoking. A non-smoker in his late 30s, he was so outraged by some of the scientific literature and public campaigns upon which anti-smoking was based that, in protest, he took up smoking.

He distilled his views in the 1991 book *Health Scare: The Misuse of Science in Public Health Policy*.

In the Scientific Scandal of Antismoking, a paper co-written with Monash University statistician Peter Finch, Ray attacked the conclusions of British epidemiologists Richard Doll and Bradford Hill who, in 1950, had linked smoking to lung cancer.

The Johnstone-Finch paper pointed to an anomaly in the Doll-Hill study: "Fisher (another British scientist) showed that men who inhaled were significantly less likely to develop lung cancer than non-inhalers."

Johnstone-Finch observed: "In spite of this defect their work (Doll-Hill) was to become the keystone of the modern anti-smoking movement."

"Above all has been the repeated and worldwide directive that smokers should quit and live longer when every controlled trial without exception has demonstrated this claim to be false."

They pointed out that Frenchwoman Jeanne Calment smoked for 100 years before dying in 1997, confirmed as the world's oldest ever person at 122.

"The resolution of this paradox lies in the simple fact that most agents have both good and bad effects on health and life expectancy and it is the net result which is of primary importance," the Johnstone-Finch paper said. "This simple but crucial fact is often ignored or forgotten by medical researchers."

Ray carried this theme into the random-breath-test debate, noting from a US crash study that daily drinkers were safer than the general sober population even when they had substantial blood-alcohol levels.

"What has been almost completely unappreciated is that if the breathalyser is used to



Swimming against the tide: Ray Johnstone smoking in his bookshop, top, with wife Val, above, and in later life crippled by his illness.

randomly test drivers and where applicable remove them from the road then it will selectively remove the safest drivers," he concluded.

By engaging in this sort of controversial critique, Ray placed his reputation and livelihood on the line. His fierce intellectual courage was his hallmark and earned him respect of many peers, though his findings were criticised as irresponsible by WA's Health Department. He smoked and drank to the day he died.

Jeffrey Raymond Johnstone was born in Fremantle on September 28, 1943, eldest of three to waterside worker and handyman Alan Johnstone and his wife Molly (Jacobsen).

Molly's father was Norwegian seaman Olaf Jacobsen who jumped ship and wed Scots girl Annie McFarlane in Geraldton, before moving to East Fremantle. Annie, a noted fortune teller, died at 103.

Ray attended Palmyra Primary School when his father died in a motorbike accident in East Street before Ray had turned 10. After Fremantle Boys and John Curtin Senior high schools he emerged with a BSc. from the University of WA.

From 1967 to 1970 he was a doctoral student in physiology at Monash University and later won the prestigious C.J. Martin postdoctoral fellowship which he undertook in the UK at Keele and Cambridge universities.

In 1973, he returned to Perth as a research fellow in the department of physiology at UWA. From 1965 to 1982 he wrote 86 publications on subjects as varied as the interaction between tone pips in the cochlea of mammals and reptiles, cholesterol, the eye movements of

fish, and the epidemiology of AIDS.

A book collector since childhood, he took an interest in antiquarian books in England and started the bookshop in Trinity Arcade to provide him with an outlet for frequent rare-book purchases from around the world, and to provide employment for his cherished mother. The shop closed a few years ago after his mother's death.

Ray was also a formidable chess player, thrilling and dangerous. He belonged to the Fremantle and Metropolitan clubs.

In midlife he married Val Alder, an outstanding eye scientist, and was eternally grateful for their two daughters.

His active mind belied a life of ongoing pain from the rare, crippling spine disease ankylosing spondylitis which was slowly fusing his vertebrae into a single bone.

At first, bending and stretching were agonising. Later, just standing or sitting was an ordeal. He bore the pain stoically.

In 2009, he suffered a fall that left him paraplegic. In his vulnerability, he suffered a second fall that rendered him quadriplegic, forcing him to leave the family home in Nedlands for the Quadriplegic Centre in Shenton Park.

There he continued his love of books, creating a second smaller library in his room.

Dr Ray Johnstone died on October 15 at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in Nedlands. He was 69.

His wife predeceased him in 2010 and he leaves daughters Elizabeth Johnstone and Vicky Prowse.

As well, he leaves stepchildren Ceri Wood and Bart Alder.

**Malcolm Smith**  
The author is a cousin of Ray Johnstone.

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