

# Staunch in the line of fire

Working for gun control is a great way to become the target of bitter attacks as **Eugene Bingham** discovered when he talked to Philip Alpers

**W**HEN they start screaming about what you're doing, you're on the right path, says tobacco researcher and Sydney University professor Simon Chapman. He should know. For years, he has fought cigarette companies, and in the past couple of years he has observed at close range another researcher facing an equally powerful lobby.

Chapman works with Philip Alpers, the former New Zealand TV journalist who now works internationally in the gun control field. He's seen what Alpers endures.

"The difference between tobacco and firearms is that people who get hot under the collar about guns are packing heat," Chapman says.

Alpers sure gets people worked up. The National Rifle Association, the most powerful lobby, labels Alpers among "conspirators" in its "Who's Who of the power brokers behind the UN Global Gun Ban Treaty". Alpers, you can tell, is quite chuffed.

It's the kind of attention he's been getting for 14 years, as he's morphed from a *Fair Go* presenter into an internationally recognised gun control researcher and adviser. Last month he headed to Argentina for yet more presentations in a country reviewing its firearms laws. He spent about four years in the United States, including time at Harvard, and is now at Sydney University. This week, a major piece of research he co-authored with Chapman and two others was published in the journal *Injury Prevention*.

Not bad for a joker without a tertiary qualification.

**T**HIS is the not-so-glamorous work of a gun researcher: As the 4WD bounces around a corner in Papua New Guinea's Southern Highlands, a gang straggles out of the jungle. There are about eight of them, faces daubed with black paint, drunk on homemade brew. Guns lean against a tree; the day before they robbed passing priests.

In the vehicle is Alpers, on a mission to study the spread of weapons in these remote parts. Is his project over? Today they live. "Ours was the vehicle they didn't rob — perhaps because we had a light machine gun and four assault rifles on board, rattling around at the feet of the five police officers in the back," Alpers recalls. Calling for better firearms control, doesn't mean you can't appreciate the worth of weapons.

In the past three years, Alpers has produced two major reports on the Pacific. He has been to PNG several times, and though his findings were somewhat frightening, he says he never felt seriously endangered, thanks to experienced local guides. On the contrary, people were more than willing to chat. "Men love to talk about their guns, wherever you go, so I would go to a village and pretty soon they would bring their guns out."

He found the proliferation of weapons in the Pacific was not down to smugglers, as was widely believed.

"Across 20 Pacific nations (and now in East Timor), the most destructive firearms used in crime and conflict were leaked from lawfully imported police, military and civilian

holdings," Alpers has written. "In Papua New Guinea, tribal fighters, mercenaries and criminals have upskilled from bows and arrows to assault rifles, almost all of them originally provided by Australia and the United States to equip PNG's military and police."

The other alarming conclusion was how few firearms were needed to cause instability. After all, George Speight's coup in Fiji was carried out with a boot-load of army assault rifles.

The point about guns coming from once-legitimate sources is a theme Alpers has illustrated since setting up Gunsafe in 1992. Having spoken to hundreds of owners over the years, he understands the legitimate reasons for many guns. "If you're a farmer and it's three in the morning and you've got a sick cow, an axe won't do the job," he says. "But then, of course, what happens is people steal an old .303 from a cowshed and saw it down."

**Never could [Alpers' opponents] better him on the issues. A lot of the opposition was based on abuse.**

MATT ROBSON

His research has been around finding laws which reduce the number of guns and prevent them falling into the wrong hands. Central to most successful regimes, he says, are firearms licences, and gun registration.

The research published this week looked at changes Australia made after the 1996 Port Arthur massacre when Martin Bryant killed 35 people. "It shows the existing decline in rates of gun homicide, gun suicide and total gun death accelerated markedly in the years following the introduction of Australia's post-Port Arthur gun laws, and the destruction of more than 700,000 civilian firearms," he says.

"It seems that removing a significant proportion of guns in a community can be followed by a reduction in the risk of getting shot."



ON A MISSION: New Zealand gun control researcher and adviser Philip Alpers investigates the spread of small arms in Papua New Guinea.

Former Disarmament Minister Matt Robson dealt with Alpers for several years. "He replaced ignorance with light," says Robson. In saying that, Robson says Alpers had many opponents. "But never could they better him on the issues. A lot of the opposition was based on abuse."

"Before him the research was pretty patchy. He was a good person to consult because of his understanding of what was happening internationally."

For several years, Alpers has been involved in United Nations moves to deal with small arms, and has attended UN conferences on the issue.

But when the Herald misreported he would "lead" the New Zealand delegation at a UN conference this year, Alpers was furious. His reaction seemed disproportionate — surely a correction would clear things up and that would be the end of it?

But when you see what Alpers suffers, you understand. In the battle over guns, there is no quarter given. Slip up, and opponents hammer him. Call a semi-automatic an automatic and they'll cite it for years as an example of

how he doesn't know a thing about guns. Another common line of attack is questioning how he is qualified to say what he does.

"Philip Alpers, a most dubious researcher," says one website. "We are not sure what, if any, actual qualification Mr Alpers, who has claimed at various times to be a Researcher and Policy Analyst, Firearms Injury Prevention, or Gun Policy Researcher, has."

When he went to Harvard as a senior fellow at the Harvard Injury Control Research Center in the school

of public health, New Zealand gun lobbyists and an NRA lawyer wrote to the school questioning Alpers' credentials.

Harvard also received inquiries from Inspector Joe Green, the New Zealand Police manager of firearms licensing and vetting.

Although initially being told by an administrator that Alpers was a visiting scholar, Green was informed by the school he was a senior fellow and visiting scholar. At one point, Green wrote to Alpers warning him he could be liable to prosecution if he continued to call himself a fellow of Harvard.

Professor David Hemenway, the centre director, told Green Alpers was entitled to use the title, and confirmed he was a "deserving and valued member" of Harvard.

But that was not enough for Green, who said he remained "unconvinced" and suggested the Herald make its own inquiries.

When Alpers decided after almost four years in the US to move back to this part of the world, and was appointed to Sydney University's school of public health in 2004, Green made an inquiry there, asking Simon Chapman, the school's professor, to confirm Alpers' title.

Green says he made the inquiries not because he had a formal complaint, but because he had received a query from a "third party" questioning Alpers' qualifications. "I was seeking clarification as much for [Alpers'] benefit," says Green. He says his actions do not show any bias against Alpers.

Green says he reads research from all sides of the debate with a critical eye, in an academic sense.

"I do have some difficulty with his research in terms of the fact it tended to be based on secondary sources."

Alpers understands being scrutinised by the gun lobby — but he says the actions of Green are an abuse of position by a police officer who is supposed to be a neutral civil servant.

So what are Alpers' qualifications? "It's very simple. I have no degree, have never pretended to have one, made no secret of my lack of a degree in media interviews during the *Fair Go* era, and never call myself 'Dr'."

"Instead, in my early 50s, after working for several years with overseas academics, lecturing at a variety of institutions around the world, and co-authoring a few academic papers, I was invited to spend two years as a senior fellow at Harvard."

His father, Antony Alpers, the Katherine Mansfield biographer, took a similar path. With no degree, Alpers snr was invited to Queens University, Ontario, as a professor of English.

Simon Chapman says it is not uncommon for people without formal qualifications to take up university posts in recognition of their expertise, particularly in areas such as music, literature and commerce.

Sydney was happy to appoint Alpers as an adjunct associate professor, given his depth of knowledge. "He is quite encyclopaedic in his understanding of gun control around the world."

For Alpers, attacks have been part of the territory since the start when, after 10 years on *Fair Go*, he was looking for another challenge. When he saw on the news an NRA figure who had been brought to New Zealand, he noticed no one stood up to tell the other side. Gunsafe was born. Almost immediately, his face was put on targets, and faeces started arriving in the mail.

While his motive is now an urge to see sensible gun controls introduced around the world, he admits the strong reaction gave him his early determination.

"Some of the most fun I had in the early days was exposing that," says Alpers.

## GUNS A MATTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH

IF THERE'S anything that really riles Philip Alpers, it's calling him anti-gun.

"I've got colleagues down the corridor who call for better car safety and nobody in their right mind would call them anti-car," he says from Sydney University.

While most people think of firearms as a criminology issue, Alpers has taken a public health approach.

He compares it to the campaigners and researchers of the 1950s who turned their attention to

reducing car deaths and injuries.

They talked about seatbelts, airbags, pedestrian crossings and other safety features common these days. Countless millions of lives have been saved as a result.

"And yet here we have a public health effect that has gone up as far as 30,000 [deaths from firearms a year] and in the US you are not allowed to talk about that as a health problem," he says.

Taking the public health approach means finding ways to make firearms less lethal, he says.

While many politicians think amnesties or buy-backs are easy ways to solve problems, they rarely work. Firearms licensing and gun registration are central to most successful regimes.

But there is no one size fits all approach — it depends on local culture and history.

Some US states have laws restricting people to buying one gun a month in an attempt to reduce trafficking in a society where it's sometimes as easy to buy a weapon as a grapefruit.

