

This is the unedited version of the Media Bites column which appeared in Australian Doctor in August 1999. The published version may have had minor changes.

## Media Bites: Journalists in flight

Fancy a trip to Paris? You will fly business class, stay at a luxury hotel, and dine well. No strings attached...

Not surprisingly, it's the sort of offer which journalists find hard to refuse. Especially when it is likely to yield stories about that sexiest of medical topics, Viagra.

Another rash of stories about impotency and related treatments popped up in the media several weeks ago, with headlines such as "Impotence rate set to skyrocket". They were written by Rada Rouse, the national medical correspondent for Australian Associated Press (the wire agency whose stories are run widely by newspapers, radio and television), and by Belinda Hickman, the medical writer for The Australian newspaper. Pfizer sponsored both journalists to attend a World Health Organisation conference on impotence in Paris. The company also paid for accommodation and some travel costs for a Medical Observer journalist, Louise Pemble.

Rouse was not particularly surprised when the invitation arrived. During three years of covering health, she has had other such junkets, including a previous trip with Pfizer to an impotence conference in Amsterdam (which was also attended by Australian Doctor's Dr Adam Taor). Eli Lilly took her to Indianapolis, and Bristol-Myers Squibb and Sanofi jointly funded a trip to an American Heart Association congress in New Orleans. Bayer also offered a trip to Germany, but she was unable to go. Like most journalists, Hickman has also had several junkets.

Whether we should accept such "gifts" is attracting some long overdue attention in the wake of the John Laws scandal, which has left the media feeling rather sensitive about the conflict of interest issue.

"I don't think it (the Paris trip) is anything like the Laws thing," says Rouse. Of course, it is nothing so sinister. But it does illustrate the lengths to which vested interests will go to influence the media.

Rouse, Hickman and Pemble all stress their independence and that they sought comment from sources other than those pushed by the company. One of Rouse's stories, about the potential for abuse of impotence drugs, would not have raised smiles at Pfizer.

It is quite true, as Rouse says, that such trips can provide access to information and contacts which is not always available to busy

journalists. She also says she has become more cynical about the pharmaceutical industry and its relationships with doctors as a result of insights gained on such trips.

Nonetheless, the relationships built between the sponsor and sponsored on such trips can be influential. Hickman notes that she felt obliged to attend a Pfizer press conference in Paris out of politeness.

Pfizer says it took journalists to the conference to encourage coverage of erectile dysfunction as a serious medical condition. The journalists say Pfizer folk made the most of opportunities to put their case for Viagra's listing on the PBS.

What this trip *does* have in common with the Laws debacle (and with the perks so often provided to doctors) is the importance of declaring conflicts of interest. Rouse acknowledged Pfizer's funding at the bottom of her stories but this was removed by the outlets which ran them.

Readers of *The Courier Mail* (Brisbane), *The Herald Sun* (Melbourne) and *The Examiner* (Launceston) would not have known of it.

Declarations ran at the bottom of the Taor and Pemble stories. Hickman put one at the end of a feature about Viagra funding but forgot - in the rush of filing stories in the middle of the Parisian night - to put it at the bottom of a news story predicting huge increases in impotence rates. None of this is intended as having a go at these journalists in particular. It has become, for better or worse, accepted practice within the media to accept such junkets, and I've had my share. In previous incarnations (when working at AAP and the *Sydney Morning Herald*), I have travelled to Sweden and Denmark courtesy of Astra Pharmaceuticals and to Berlin courtesy of Roche. Each time I felt some discomfort about the arrangement - but not enough to knock the offer back.

The invitations seem to have dried up since I began writing articles like this.

Which is perhaps the point. Companies would not splash money on journalists unless they saw some value for themselves in such an investment. Just like they wouldn't spend small fortunes wining and dining doctors - or sending them to conferences in exotic spots - if they didn't expect some return.