

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

Media Bites: Silly season

T'is the season to be silly. Not to mention millennial madness - which just happens to be yielding riches for psychologists in where-else-but-America. (Have a look at <http://www.1-800-therapist.com/Y2K.html> to see how).

In the spirit of these weird times - and copying every other media outlet which has been running boring "the best of.." lists for months now - this column hereby launches the inaugural Sick Media Awards.

These are not to be confused with the many other media awards designed to encourage journalists to cover particular health topics (like heart disease, arthritis, HRT, to name just a few).

These are the awards for the stories that otherwise might not be rewarded.

1. The Golden Tonsils Plaque

There are so many potential winners in this category, which recognises everyone involved in creating stories which are more like ads. Those who promoted the leukotriene receptor antagonists for asthma, the "healthy" margarine, the high-tech screening test for heart disease, the cancer "cure" from New Zealand mussels, and fish oil treatment for post natal depression all deserve mention.

Just to put me in an awkward spot, the Australian Doctor team has nominated a cover story run by my other employer, The Bulletin magazine. It was a most flattering profile of Dr Michael Wooldridge in which he was allowed to portray himself as the saviour of the health system.

It's too difficult to decide on a single winner, so perhaps we should all share it. One PR pro, who wishes to remain anonymous in order to keep selling ads as news to journalists, has nominated: "All the health journos who published my media releases word for word and ran my video news releases as news and kept my clients happy. Maybe you could run a

'best result for a paying client working with absolutely no new news by a healthcare PR person' next year. That'd get the nominations out."

2. All Doctors are Bastards Trophy

The winners of this award, which recognises events who have done the most to reinforce negative public perceptions of the medical profession, is the AMA leadership brawl and the MRI scan scam.

3. Most Worthy Certificate

ABC broadcaster Dr Norman Swan nominates the Wills review of health and medical research, together with the Federal Government's response to it, as the serious health story of the year. This certificate recognises that worthiness does not necessarily correlate with newsworthiness.

4. Publishing Coup of the Year

Hard to say whether the coup perpetrators or victim should win this award. Maybe the management of the Journal of the American Medical Association should have to share it with Dr George Lundberg, the editor sacked for publishing a survey of college student's definitions of sex. It was judged too politically hot in light of certain presidential cigars. In a big year for publishing coups, The New England Journal of Medicine's editor was also ousted.

5. Spin the Doctors Award

This honours selective approaches to drug promotion. The ever-vigilant watchdog of pharmaceutical advertising, the Medical Lobby for Appropriate Marketing's Peter Mansfield, reckons there are two clear winners. The Astra ad for Plendil claiming benefits despite the HOT trial data suggesting a slightly increased mortality with lower blood pressure targets for non-diabetics; and Wyeth's Premarin ad claiming benefits despite the HERS study finding a trend for increased mortality in women with pre-existing cardiovascular disease on HRT. He reassures Australian Doctor management that this statement is not defamatory as it is an opinion.

(Astra declined to accept the award, on the grounds that the retrospective analysis of the HOT data was "scientifically invalid". Wyeth also declined the award, citing "compelling evidence from a large number of observational studies" that a reduced risk of coronary heart disease is associated with HRT.)

6. Future Shock Prize

This award recognises where millennial madness might take you. It is nominated by Ray Moynihan, an ABC journalist recently returned from studying media coverage of pharmaceuticals in the US, where the nightly news is sandwiched between ads for prescription medicines. In a Pfizer ad, a man turns to pat his dog. The dog looks away sadly and ignores his owner. The voiceover promotes a cognitive dysfunction disorder - in dogs.