

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

## **Media Bites: Turn off**

Saturday afternoons at our place could be pretty scary when I was a kid. My brothers screaming and bouncing off the furniture in a replay of what was happening on the screen. They were great fans of World Championship Wrestling, whose stars went by names like Brute.

Surely that's not why I've never managed to become a TV enthusiast. There are many reasons to dislike the medium, as a recent report on ABC TV's Media Watch reminded me. It showed a television news report on a new surgical device which failed to mention that the footage had been provided as part of a PR campaign promoting the device.

Media Watch held up the item as an example of sloppy journalism. But poor journalism is a relatively minor concern when it comes to TV's potential for affecting health. What is really worrying is all the other stuff - the cartoons, ads, and dramas which make up family viewing. These may have a far greater impact on health than news reports on health issues.

The American Medical Association recently held a seminar called "The Media's Impact on Health Behaviours". Most of the news out of it was bad (as news always is), and most of the bad news related to TV. Like other junk diets, television is contributing to the world's obesity epidemic.

Delegates heard of several studies showing that reducing TV viewing time is an effective way of reducing weight in children and teenagers. Other research has shown an association between TV viewing and fitness in children and adults, so that the more TV people watch, the less fit they are.

Australian research has also documented the potential for a TV-rich diet to promote unhealthy eating. Most ads shown during children programs are for foods, usually ones high in fat, salt and sugar.

If there was a pill which was as good as turning off the telly for fighting flab, we'd all be on it.

One study presented at the recent seminar was undertaken after University of California researchers were surprised to notice cartoon characters smoking and drinking. They analysed all G-rated animated feature films released between 1937 and 1997 by five major production companies.

Of 50 films, about two-thirds showed tobacco or alcohol use - the worst offenders included Pinocchio and 101 Dalmatians. Good characters were as likely as baddies to drink and smoke, and no negative long-term effects were associated with either substance. The researchers concluded that “tens of millions of very young children and adolescents are clearly being exposed to a positive portrayal of tobacco and alcohol use.”

Medical dramas can also have a powerful impact. When a character on the BBC’s drama, Casualty, overdosed on paracetamol, health services reported an increase in similar poisonings in the following week - but only in patients who had seen the episode.

In 1996, the American Medical Association published “Physician Guide to Media Violence”, which estimates that TV exposes the average American teenager to 14,000 sex-related references per year, and that the average American child will witness more than 200,000 acts of violence on TV - including 16,000 murders - before turning 18.

It cites research showing that 57 per cent of all shows on American television contain violence - compared with 66 per cent of children’s shows.

Many doctors have already helped distribute Young Media Australia (YMA) brochures about children and television violence (ring 1800 245 959 for copies). It cites evidence that on-screen violence can teach children aggression, desensitise them to violence and make them afraid.

Most health groups recommend children watch no more than 2 hours of TV a day, whereas YMA says the average Aussie kid watches 2.5 hours. The American Medical Association document advises doctors to consider TV viewing as a risk factor when treating obese or aggressive children and recommends taking a “media history”. Further recommendations are expected from a policy due for release later this year by the Division of Paediatrics in the Royal Australasian College of Physicians.

This month marked the Fifth American National TV Turnoff Week, which was backed by the American Medical Association and American Academy of Pediatrics.

Have you switched off yet?