

This is the unedited version of the Media Bites column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in November 2000. The published version may have had minor changes.

### **Media Bites: Sex, Mud and transparency**

It's rather trendy at the moment to talk of the need for "transparency". In the United States, researchers have just been given a top-level bucketing for failing to disclose conflicts of interest when enrolling patients in clinical trials. The secretary of health and human services, Donna Shalala, announced strict penalties to encourage, among other things, a greater transparency in the conduct of clinical trials.

Even journalists are trying to become more transparent about conflicts of interest, to the extent that a recent Sydney Morning Herald article on the tobacco industry ended with a declaration about its author that once might have been considered extraordinary: "Before joining the Herald, Mark Ragg worked at times as a consultant to the NSW Cancer Council, the Australian Cancer Network, Action on Smoking and Health, State and Federal health departments, and other bodies aiming to control smoking".

That's the background to why "transparency" was the word that popped into my head when the Good Weekend magazine (distributed with the Sydney Morning Herald and Age) ran a double-page advertisement featuring a disgruntled couple in bed. The headline said: "Sex is hard to talk about. But it's even harder to live without." The text was all about - you guessed - erection troubles ("hard to talk about, easy to treat), how common they are, and "see your doctor today".

The small print said: "This service is brought to you by Impotence Australia and is supported by ASSERT NSW (The Australian Society of Sex Educators, Researchers and Therapists), and the Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia.

This is what subsequent phone calls uncovered: The Prostate Cancer Foundation said the ad was part of a Pfizer campaign but the Foundation had agreed to be involved because it was a way of getting exposure for its name and logo. "We have a very close relationship with Pfizer," a spokeswoman said. "They sponsor a lot of our programs. They

said they were going to do some community service announcements on impotence.”

Next stop is Impotence Australia, where the CEO, Brett McCann, explains that the organisation was recently established with a two-year grant of \$200,000 from Pfizer. But it is an independent body and is also seeking funding from other sources, he stresses. Its aims are “to support men and their partners either to go to their local doctor or to a specialist sexual health doctor to talk to them about their options about impotence”. He describes it as a consumer organisation - but its Board comprises only medicos and sex therapists although negotiations are underway with a potential consumer representative. The ads were funded by Pfizer as part of a three-month newspaper and magazine advertising campaign, he says.

Next stop is the number given by directories for ASSERT. The doctor who answers the phone didn't know about the ad until he received a poster of it in the mail. But he expects other ASSERT members must have been involved.

Next stop is to ask Pfizer whether, in the interests of transparency, their involvement should have been declared on the ad? Spokesman Alan Brindell says this was not necessary as it was not Pfizer's ad. Pfizer provided an untied “educational grant” to Impotence Australia and had no say over how it was spent. If the ad was reminiscent of Viagra ads from medical publications, that was because Impotence Australia had wanted to use that imagery due to favourable market research.

In a last effort to find out who drove the ad, I ring Good Weekend's advertising department and the ad agency Sudler & Hennessey. Both places say they have been asked to refer queries to Sue Cook at the PR company, Hill and Knowlton. She says she is acting for Pfizer in this instance and refers any further queries back to Alan Brindell.

If this all sounds clear as mud, you've got the picture.

Rhonda Galbally, who chaired the review which is set to recommend continuing the ban on direct-to-consumer advertising, supports the idea of requiring ads such as the Good Weekend one to disclose any relevant sponsorship. “The more transparent everything can be, the better,” she says.

