

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2001. The published version may have had minor changes.

### **Media Bites: SOME BALD FACTS**

Imagine for a moment that you are a bloke of a certain age, worried about your thinning tuft, and interested enough about such matters to be flicking through *Men's Health* magazine.

It falls open at a full-page advertisement from Merck Sharp & Dohme which has an intriguing picture of a balding head, uncannily similar to your own. "Hair loss? Let Science fill you in," it says.

You take up its suggestion to visit [www.seeyourdoctor.com.au](http://www.seeyourdoctor.com.au) which discusses a range of options for treating hair loss, and mentions that male pattern hair loss is associated with increased levels of 5-alpha reductase.

It tells how 39-year-old Douglas Mickle and others have developed thicker hair since finding out about a new hair loss treatment.

The site promises to put you in touch with "the right" doctor, which means listing those in your area who belong to the "hair loss interest group". There is also a list of suggested questions to take along to your doc, including "what are the latest developments in hair loss treatment and management?"

Interestingly, the suggested questions don't raise issues such as the potential harms of treatment, the option of simply learning to live with less hair, and the notion that baldness might be a normal condition which doesn't require intervention.

The possibility that baldness might even be sexy - judging by the current vogue for shaved heads - is certainly not mentioned.

It seems fair to assume that the average Joe Balding who reads this site is more likely than other balding men to end up at a doctor asking about new hair loss treatments. It also seems a fair bet that they would hear about a Merck drug for hair loss.

But Merck insists its campaign does not aim to boost sales of its inhibitor of 5-alpha reductase, finasteride (Propecia). It is simply trying to provide general information and “demystify” the issue. And the company’s legal advice is that the site does not breach the industry code of conduct banning direct marketing of prescription products to the general public.

It will be interesting to see the outcome of a complaint to the Australian Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association by Adelaide GP Peter Mansfield, who has compiled a long list of reasons why he believes the site breaches the code. These include that the information is misleading and unbalanced, and that the promotion of a group of doctors as “the right doctor” does not conform to professional standards of ethics.

I contacted some of the doctors listed as “hair loss interest group members”. Most said they had had very few patients from the site (though one doc said he was now an enthusiastic user himself).

It would be quite a different story if Australia followed the US lead in allowing direct marketing to consumers of pharmaceuticals. Then doctors could expect to be flooded by patients demanding “the latest hair loss treatment”.

Propecia is one of the most heavily promoted drugs in the US, where an estimated \$US 100 million was spent on advertising it to consumers in 1999.

Direct to consumer advertising in the US is also sending ripples over the border, with Canadian doctors getting an average of 10 specific drug requests each week from patients.

This prompted the British Columbia Ministry of Health to fund the Therapeutics Initiative to provide independent, balanced information to help doctors deal with requests for advertised products.

The Initiative summed up the evidence on Propecia thus: that six men would have to be treated for one year for one to be satisfied with the appearance of his hair, while one in 50 men treated for one year will have an adverse sexual experience. It also notes that there may be other risks as the long term effects of treatment are unknown.

This is the sort of information that Joe Balding might like to know. But only the naive would expect advertising to give it to him.

Clever marketing, even if it is Clayton's marketing, is all about shifting product. Which is quite a different thing to providing balanced information.