

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: Undercover agent**

Dr Deepak Malhotra arrives at our coffee rendezvous looking every inch the movie star in his black sweater, black jacket, and black sunglasses. He carries his 56 years handsomely and, fresh from lunch with his film director, is clearly quite chuffed about his second career.

When the Sydney GP flew out of India recently, an Immigration official recognised him from a movie which is taking that country by storm. Malhotra plays a small part in the film, which was shot in Australia and whose title translates as *The Heart Desires*. He has also acted in an Indian TV series and hopes to land further acting work.

You might have caught Malhotra recently in another on-screen role. He was an undercover agent for the Nine Network's Sunday program for a report on pharmaceutical marketing. He attended several "educational" meetings with a hidden camera, to investigate whether they truly were educational or pushing a particular drug or providing over-the-top hospitality.

The program featured some rather sensational footage from a Pfizer function on the Sydney Showboat attended by more than 200 doctors. The semi-naked dancing girls made the whole event look extremely tacky, to say the least. Malhotra also attended a Wyeth dinner at the plush ANA Hotel in Sydney, which he said was pushing one of their products for anxiety.

Unlike other functions featured on the program, Malhotra praised a meeting at another plush hotel, sponsored by Essex, which he said provided valuable education. Such events were the exception, he said.

Malhotra says he was not at all worried about working undercover. "I am an ex officer of the Indian airforce and I have been in combat in India," he says. "Nothing makes me nervous."

He went on the show to make his point that the industry should be involved in funding medical education, but that it should be organised through an independent third party. Malhotra, who was medical director

at Wyeth in the mid 1980s but left the company after a falling out, is also critical of medicos who exploit industry hospitality.

Apart from working three days a week as a GP, he writes for Indian newspapers and hosts a community radio talkback show in Sydney. He is also well known to the letters editors at newspapers and the specialist medical press.

As you've probably realised, Malhotra is quite a character. When asked why he chose to move to Australia, rather than the US or UK, it is not clear how far his tongue is implanted in his cheek when he replies: "I like Kraft cheese - that is what I told Al Grassby when he asked me."

Colleagues who worked with Malhotra when he was medical superintendent at various Sydney hospitals are not at all surprised by his role on Nine. "He's a very outgoing personality, an interesting, well spoken, humorous sort of character," said one. Another added: "He rubs some people up the wrong way because he's very forthright about things. He calls a shovel a spade and that sort of thing."

Reviews of Malhotra's performance have been mixed. Dr Michael Nolan, a Melbourne GP who wrote an article raising concerns about pharmaceutical marketing in his local division's newsletter, is sympathetic to his concerns but says they should have been raised in professional forums instead: "It made the profession look bad." After the show, Nolan had a phone call from his brother joking "all doctors are crooks".

However, the National Prescribing Service's Dr Stephen Phillips believes it is useful to have such issues aired publicly - especially if it encourages doctors to improve their critical appraisal skills. "They are often not as skilled as they think they are at evaluating the information (from companies)," he says.

Like it or not, the show had an impact. One Sydney GP reports that several industry functions have been cancelled for fear of further bad publicity.

For doctors, it is good reminder of that old ethical test: if you wouldn't feel comfortable having your attendance at a function hit the headlines, then it's probably better to stay home.

Malhotra has had little feedback from colleagues, but says his patients loved the show. Strangely, drug reps have stopped making appointments. And the invites to extravagant dinners have stopped. “I really don’t care,” he says, “because I can afford to eat without their help.”