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Media Bites: Marketing as a health hazard

Once upon a time, you were pretty well guaranteed some peace and privacy once the toilet door was closed. Not any more.

What was once a public convenience has become yet another “access point” for marketers, as I was reminded during a recent visit to the facilities at Sydney Airport.

I sat down, still half asleep, a captive audience for the ad on the back of the door promoting a certain pill to beat hangovers. Apparently you take it before hitting the turps and don't feel a thing the morning after.

In my early morning fug, that translated into something like, there's no need to worry about drinking in moderation when you can get sozzled without suffering the consequences.

A reminder, perhaps, that successful marketing tells the customer what they want to hear rather than what they actually need to know.

The previous week the same toilet door - so I'm a creature of habit - had an advertisement for a cervical cancer screening technology. A few weeks before that it was urging travellers to stock up on anti-diarrhoea pills.

My latest investigation of toilet marketing was en route to a prostate cancer conference in Adelaide, where clinicians and scientists spoke of the many uncertainties involved in diagnosis and treatment.

The patient representatives, on the other hand, seemed far more certain about what should be done - that there should be campaigns to raise public awareness about prostate cancer. Many were not so keen on the notion that more - more concern, more testing, more treatment - is sometimes less.

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists was trying to get across just that notion in a recent statement about the potential pitfalls of total body screening using CT scanning, which has

been widely promoted in the media. “This procedure will lead to the discovery of numerous findings that will not ultimately affect patients' health, but will result in increased patient anxiety, unnecessary follow-up examinations and treatments and wasted expense,” it said.

Meanwhile, back in Adelaide, the conference over for the day, I flicked on the telly. ABC TV had an alarming report about sudden unexpected death in people with epilepsy, urging greater awareness of the problem. It sent my grandmother into a frenzy of worry about a young relative.

Next morning, the Sydney Morning Herald had a page three advertisement by a doctor offering a free cosmetic consultation about, amongst other things, the “new permanent anti-wrinkle injection Aquamid (as seen on A Current Affair)”. The helpful young woman at the other end of the 1800 number said the injection would cost only \$1290 plus GST. Naturally there was no mention of potential risks.

But Pelé, the “athlete of the century”, is the person who really brought it home. You can't have missed him in the magazine and TV ads encouraging men to seek treatment for impotence, a campaign cleverly timed to coincide with the World Cup.

As I wondered about the small fortune the campaign must have cost Pfizer, that old BTO song seemed prophetic - bbbaby, you ain't seen nuthin' yet. If the amount of health marketing and disease-mongering in the media seems overwhelming now, just wait til DNA screening technology hits the headlines and clinical practice.

When tests become widely available to predict an individual's risk of future disease, companies will have an obvious interest in promoting them, particularly if they boost markets for the subsequent treatments.

And GPs no doubt will be left picking up the pieces, having to explain the complexities and uncertainties of such testing - issues which probably won't figure highly in their marketing. Michael Kidd, professor of general practice at the University of Sydney, says these issues are “just around the corner” for GPs.

“The sheer volume of information about genetic predisposition could well be overwhelming for a lot of the public and health care providers,” he

says. “Many people are worried about the time and workload implications.”

Perhaps it’s time for a toilet safety warning: marketing overkill can be a health hazard.