

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2003. Minor changes may have been made to the published piece.

Media Bites: TRUTH POTIONS

When I read a recent British Medical Journal editorial warning that cannabis is a major public health hazard, I couldn't help but chuckle.

A few minutes earlier I'd been reading about the potential of cannabis as a therapeutic agent in that same week's issue of *The Lancet*.

It just goes to show that what you find depends on what you're looking for.

The nihilists might say that it also shows there's no such thing as "truth". On the other hand, perhaps it's evidence that truths can be found in apparently opposing views.

At least that's what I began to ponder after interviewing dozens of experts of various pedigrees about the implications of the Pan Pharmaceuticals fiasco.

For some, Pan is a wake-up call, illustrating the need for tougher regulation of complementary therapies. For others, it is evidence that Australia already has made some progress in this area - Pan's problems mightn't have been detected in many other countries, they say.

For some, Pan was a chance to vent their spleen about the complementary sector generally. "Medicine man hucksters," said NSW Premier Bob Carr, complaining of the lack of scientific evidence.

Others noted that lack of evidence is not an issue only for the complementary sector, as any casual perusal of the Cochrane Collaboration's library shows. And if there is so much concern about the lack of research into complementary therapies, they said, where is the funding to support it?

Some doctors felt the rush by colleagues to condemn "unproven" treatments missed the point - that many people turn to complementary

therapies for reasons that have little to do with notions of scientific evidence.

Some saw Pan as an opportunity to sound the alarm about the safety of complementary therapies generally. There have been many reports of serious adverse reactions and drug interactions. Many more probably go unrecognised or unreported.

In response, others cited the wealth of evidence of harm caused by mainstream medicines. A timely BMJ editorial noted that manufacturing breakdown is just one of many problems contributing to medicine-related harms. It also described the pharmaceutical industry's influence in shaping and sometimes distorting medical research, clinical practice and regulatory agendas.

For some, the fiasco was a reminder of the need for better systems to encourage consumers to report adverse reactions to all medicines, including complementary products. They also noted that more could be done to encourage complementary therapists to report adverse events.

Some saw Pan as an opportunity to push for better regulation of complementary health practitioners - though others worried that this might give the sector undue credibility.

For some, Pan has been a chance to raise concerns about the "cost recovery" funding model of the Therapeutics Goods Administration. They argue this makes the regulator more focused on industry than public health needs. Others saw the crackdown on Pan as a sign of quite the opposite.

Perhaps I'm just a fence-sitter but it seems there might be a bit of truth in all of the above. Just as cannabis might have both harmful and helpful properties.