

**MARKETING MEDICINE**

Just before Christmas 2003, I received the following email:

*"Dear Martin, ... Re: HEALTHY 25% DISCOUNT ON HEART SCAN FOR YOU AND YOUR EXECUTIVE TEAM. Give yourself and your executive team an early Christmas present this year or help them make a New Year's resolution that is easy to keep. Either way, our 25% discount on heart scan appointments before 31 January 2004 is a healthy gift. A heart scan is normally \$415 including GST."*

A prominent executive endorsed the offer, saying, "I have had a heart scan and so has my wife. You owe it to yourself and your family." It went on to give contact details of a company offering heart and body scanning.

Such targeted marketing, long a tactic in the commercial world, is now on the march in medicine. The benefits of virtual colonoscopy and body scans are aggressively marketed to the "worried well". Cures for sexual dysfunction or miraculous repair of visual defects enjoy similar paid publicity. Some would say, why not? It is the consumer's right to choose and buy in a free market!

However, the growth in direct medical advertising has occurred without being widely debated in the community or within the profession. This is in stark contrast to the recent vigorous debate on direct advertising of pharmaceuticals to consumers.

Some would argue that medical advertising is adequately controlled by legislation, such as the *Trade Practices Act 1974*, which prohibits misleading or deceptive advertising, unconscionable conduct and misrepresentation.

But has medicine now been reduced to a trade bound by trade precepts?

Has not the time come for our professional bodies to tackle direct medical advertising? National guidelines, developed and endorsed by our profession, are the least we should expect.

*Martin B Van Der Weyden*

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