

ADVERTISING ANTICS

In Plato's *Republic*, two ancient Athenian philosophers, Socrates and Thrasymachus, probe the essence of medicine and healing:

Socrates: "Tell me: is a doctor in the precise sense ... a money-maker or someone who treats the sick? Tell me about the one who is really a doctor."

Thrasymachus: "He's the one who treats the sick."

It seems that even the ancients explored the intrinsic conflict between caring and commerce in medicine. Today, the relevance of this conflict has grown, as commercialism and its culture of creating wealth infiltrate health care.

Essential to this process is advertising.

Once, the medical profession regarded advertising with disdain. Professional reputations and expertise had always been spread by word of mouth. Alas, no more. Now the media proclaim the availability of "unrivalled" medical services. These newcomers are commercial concerns capitalising on medical technology.

Promotions lauding their services are delivered by celebrities, and Australians are urged to screen for potential "nasties" by having total body scans. This is despite the fact that health authorities are so concerned about total body scans that in 2004 they issued a public health alert: "Full body scans ... involve doses of radiation that health experts do not consider to be justifiable in terms of a health check".

But the promos push consumer rights: "You have the right to know...what might be waiting to make you sick." And recently, there has been a disturbing twist in advertisements which seems to threaten the independence of medical practice: "Your doctor may advise you not to waste your time or money — but is he willing to take legal responsibility if he's wrong? Insist on a referral."

We hear a lot from our health ministers about transparency and ethical conduct for doctors. We may well ask whether the advertising antics of some health care businesses are also on their radar?



Martin B Van Der Weyden

LETTERS

A case for altruistic surrogacy

162 Adam P Morton

162 Marc J N C Keirse

Bisphosphonates and osteonecrosis: analogy to phossy jaw

163 A Michael Donoghue

Smoothing the transition to adult care

164 Peter W Holmes, David Armstrong, Nicholas Freezer

Riluzole: a glimmer of hope in the treatment of motor neurone disease

164 Robert D Henderson, Pamela A McCombe

164 Matthew C Kiernan

Allocation concealment and blinding: when ignorance is bliss

165 Vance W Berger

165 Harri Hemila

166 Peta M Forder, Val J Gebski, Anthony C Keech

Achieving equal standards in medical student education: is a national exit examination the answer?

166 H Patrick McNeil, Michael C Grimm

167 Christopher Lawson-Smith

167 Ken Cox

168 Bogda Koczwara, on behalf of the Cancer Council of Australia Oncology Education Committee

SNAPSHOT

144 Cobbled tongue

Ritesh Agarwal, Ashutosh N Aggarwal, Dheeraj Gupta

BOOK REVIEWS

133 Medical complications during pregnancy. 6th ed.

reviewed by Barry N J Walters

146 Communication for doctors. How to improve patient care and minimize legal risks. reviewed by Edward C Rosenow III

OBITUARY

150 Bernard John Amos by Miles Little

CORRECTIONS

143 Recognition of depression and psychosis by young Australians and their beliefs about treatment (Med J Aust 2005; 183: 18-23).

143 Adult domiciliary oxygen therapy. Position statement of the Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand (Med J Aust 2005; 182: 621-626).

114 IN THIS ISSUE

161 IN OTHER JOURNALS



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