

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?



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