

## **Killing me softly: myth in pharmaceutical advertising**

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Tim Scott, Neil Stanford, David R Thompson

### THESE AUTHORS NOTE:

"In studies of how drug advertising influences doctors' behaviour, little attention is given to visual and linguistic imagery."

"The authors argue that myth is often deployed in drug adverts to depict exaggerated therapeutic efficacy and that doctors should be aware of this."

The influence of pharmaceutical advertising in medical journals has received little attention.

"There is evidence that advertising influences doctors' behaviour more than they might think."

"If advertising influences beliefs and behaviour and images are used in advertising, then images must contribute to influencing beliefs and behaviour."

"Advertising in medical journals offers a privileged channel of communication from drug companies to doctors."

The drug industry medicalises normal phenomena and promotes drugs as solutions to social problems. **[IMPORTANT]**

These authors examine how "drug advertisers use images to construct mythical and potentially misleading associations between diseases and products."

Interpreting images is the "science of signs," called semiology. Semiologists argue that we do not consume things, but rather we consume the meanings attached to things. "For example, the Coca Cola brand is less about a carbonated drink than a promise of social identity."

These authors selected advertisements from the BMJ for cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, central nervous system, musculoskeletal, and respiratory diseases.

### RESULTS

These authors carefully and thoroughly analyzed the imagery and mythology of drug advertisements found in the BMJ. They noted a number of disturbing things, including:

Sex, kissing, natural couplings, natural choice, sensual, slave, suck, eroticism, "phallus, stroking its shaft, head inclined, lips parted—and simultaneously strangles her lover," the underworld, a "remarkable transformation of woman and snake that can hold the reader's gaze, fascinated by the sight of a sensuous woman and boa constrictor becoming one another," revealing of breasts and nipples, love between mothers and young children, "a mythology of liberation from oppression, an age of reason and democracy, the French Revolution and the start of the Enlightenment," etc.

## SUMMARY FROM AUTHORS

"Advertising in medical journals provides a privileged channel of communication between the pharmaceutical industry and clinicians."

"A critical study of imagery employed in drug adverts reveals it to be one the most powerful weapons of drug promotion."

"Drug advertising uses strong imagery to fabricate mythical associations between medical conditions and branded drugs."

"Drug advertising manipulates readers' perceptions by subtle appeal to ancient and modern mythological foundations of humanism and Western psychology."

"Clinicians claiming immunity to drug advertising greatly underestimate some advertising agencies, whose skill they should respect as comparable to their own."

## DISCUSSION

"Our analysis suggests that myth is often deployed in drug advertising to depict exaggerated therapeutic efficacy: armed with such drugs, the clinician can liberate patients from the oppression of disease and restore them to normality."

"With medicine as their alibi, advertisers exploit the nude." **[WOW!]**

"Accused of eroticism, the company, agency, or reader has an alibi in physiology."

"Viewing exotic or erotic scenes derived from 'old masters,' the reader is relocated from office to gallery, obtaining visual relief from the clinical grind."

"In law and science, words are precise and accountable, justified by evidence. In advertising, the image is ambiguous and unaccountable. It makes its 'killing' (an aggressive metaphor for selling) softly."

“Thus we arrive at the very principle of myth: to transform history into nature. Associations between diseases and drugs are made to seem natural, unmotivated by commercial interest.”

Drug advertisers link the administration of drugs “as natural as kissing, bathing, and other variations on a coupling theme. Condition and brand are presented as belonging to a higher logical order of things that belong to each other. To naturalise is also to neutralise or ‘dis-interest’ the intention to promote.”

“The aim of our research is to raise awareness of mythology in drug advertising, which may lead to doctors being better able to resist misleading promotion.”

“This implies a need for closer regulation of journals as a privileged channel of communication from the drug industry to clinicians.”

#### KEY POINTS FROM DAN MURPHY

- 1) In medical journals, the imagery of the drug advertisements are more powerful in influencing doctors' behaviour than are the words.
- 2) The imagery used often includes sex, kissing, natural couplings, natural choice, sensual, slave, suck, eroticism, phallus, stroking of phallus, erotic love, nudity, the underworld, sensuality, snakes, love between mothers and young children, liberation from oppression, reason, democracy, enlightenment, etc.
- 3) The imagery in drug advertisements exaggerate the therapeutic efficacy of the drugs.
- 4) This advertising influences doctors' behaviour more than they might think.
- 5) Advertising images influence doctor's beliefs and behaviour.
- 6) The drug industry medicalises normal phenomena and promotes drugs as solutions to social problems.
- 7) Drug advertising uses strong imagery to fabricate mythical associations between medical conditions and drugs.
- 8) Drug advertising manipulates readers' perceptions by subtle appeal to ancient and modern mythological foundations of humanism and Western psychology.
- 9) The imagery employed in drug adverts are one the most powerful weapons of drug promotion.
- 10) Clinicians claiming immunity to drug advertising greatly underestimate drug advertising agencies.