

# Physician Advertising

■ Diane H. Schetky, M.D.

## ETHICS

THE CALL CAME AS I WAS preparing to write this column. The woman on the other end of the line identified herself as an employee of The Business Review Company in Virginia Beach, VA. She said she'd written an article about me which she would like to publish in my local paper and she wanted to go over the galleys with me. Intrigued as to how she could write about someone she'd never interviewed, I stayed on the line. I then heard how Dr. Schetky could make you happy again and that she and her staff (non-existent) offered a menu of services including sex and marital therapy, substance abuse treatment, individual, group, behavioral therapy and all sorts of interventions with troublesome children. The "article," which I could edit, would run three columns in the business advertising section which would cost me only \$269.50. She assured me her company had been doing this for 20 years and that her services were very popular with "physicians and psychiatrists" up and down the east coast. I politely informed her that my problem was not paucity of referrals but paucity of child psychiatrists in my area. She continued her speech advising me that there was no such thing as too much business.

Given the difficulty, in part created by managed care, that many child psychiatrists in private practice now face trying to get patients, it is tempting to turn to advertising. Although advertising by physicians has historically been frowned upon, low keyed advertising has gradually gained acceptance. The AMA Code of Medical Ethics cautions against any advertising that is misleading or deceptive and advises against aggressive high pressured ads. It recommends sticking to objective information such as education, specialty, Board certification, payment arrangements, and office hours. The Code strongly advises against testimonials from patients or claims of offering unique services. Physicians and hospitals should also avoid ads that play upon fear or guilt: "Are you having trouble communicating with your teenager? Is he moody, sleeping irregular hours, preoccupied with rock music, and underachieving in school? He could be in serious trouble. Act now before it is too late! We can help."

Public image is another factor to consider in deciding whether or not to advertise. We don't want to look like ambulance chasing lawyers who use TV to solicit claims for less than perfect babies and whiplash injuries. Had I permitted the ad professing I was offering all things to all people, I would have created a lean and hungry look suggesting my practice was in trouble. Intelligent readers would also recognize that, no matter how well trained I was, I could not have expertise in all of these areas.



I perused my local yellow pages to see what sort of ads there were concerning physicians. In the past, most of us made do with simple one line listings and a few would pay extra for bold face type. The trend is definitely for "splashier" ads. Multicolor ads now jump off the page vying for the readers attention like the cheap plastic banners of a used car dealer. There appears to be an inverse relationship between size of ad and success of practice. Some ads are ethically questionable. A general

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practitioner advertises that he is board certified then lists pediatrics, ob- gyn, dermatology, internal medicine and minor surgery, implying certification in all of them. A plastic surgeon states he is "quite simply the best in cosmetic surgery." (He may well be the best and only one in this area as Mainers tend to make do with their wrinkles.) He goes on to promise "subtle changes and dramatic results."

While visiting in Connecticut, I scanned the yellow pages and noted fierce competition among the plastic surgeons and dermatologists in Fairfield County who take out quarter page ads appealing to the quest for youth. These ads seem tame compared to those for physicians, hospitals and managed care organizations which adorn subway cars in urban areas. This sort of advertising is a sad

commentary on the metamorphosis of medicine from a professional to a business ethos.

There are far more effective ways than advertising for child psychiatrists in private practice to get patients. These include contacting other physicians, schools, courts, social workers and psychologists, and letting them know of your special interest areas and availability for consultation. Getting involved in the community as a volunteer increases visibility, as does serving on boards and giving talks. Child psychiatrists can offer to write educational columns in their local paper or request a news article about their activities and practice. For further help in this area, request the AACAP Marketing Kit by mailing a \$12.00 check, payable to AACAP, to: AACAP Public Information, 3615 Wisconsin Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20016. ■

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