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The Media and slimming

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The Media comprises the communication channels of TV, radio, newspapers (national and regional), magazines and specialist publications. Within these channels, communication can be via the editorial material, the advertising material or the advertorials (adverts cleverly designed as editorials!). There is not a single method within any of the communication channels which is not used to promulgate advice on the benefits, or techniques, of weight loss.

In the present paper, the intention is to take a critical look at the way that the Media tackles the subject of slimming in its editorials and advertising, giving examples where appropriate and making some constructive comments about the ways in which the scientists and the Media can work together to produce an end result which will please them both.

EDITORIAL

First, let us see what evidence is already available about the way that the Media treats nutritional matters, in general, in its editorial columns.

Surveys of the Media's treatment of general nutritional matters. The American Council on Science & Health (ACSH) launched its first nutrition survey in 1982 and has continued to conduct these surveys every few years, the latest findings being those available for 1986–1988 (ACSH, 1988).

The nutrition articles from twenty-five magazines were sent anonymously to four judges for evaluation in terms of accuracy, timeliness and readability. The judges assigned the articles a grade from zero (lowest) to four (highest) for each of the three categories. Accuracy scores counted 50%, whilst the timeliness and readability scores each counted 25%. The cumulative scores were converted to percentages and rated as excellent (80–100%), good (70–79%), fair (60–69%) or poor (below 60%).

Only two magazines were rated as 'excellent' and one of these was *Consumer Reports*, the American equivalent of *Which?* magazine. Ten of the magazines were ranked in the 'good' category. They were generally accurate and used a variety of mainstream scientific sources to discuss topics of importance. Eleven magazines of the twenty-five had scores in the 'fair' category. Magazines at the upper end of this category provided generally reliable information, but overall scores suffered because a few articles contained poor advice based on speculation and myths. Magazines at the lower end of the 'fair' range often presented inaccurate nutrition information and used esoteric examples to encourage certain behaviours like fasting or taking mineral and vitamin supplements. These magazines often relied on preliminary studies, unreliable sources, speculations and myths. Two magazines were ranked in the 'poor' category; most of their advice was based on conjecture or questionable research rather than scientifically sound facts.

No organization in Britain has ever carried out a Media survey comparable to that done by ACSH but the results would probably not be very much different.

Some insight into how the editors of British newspapers and magazines regard the

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Table 1. *How editors of UK newspapers and magazines viewed nutritional issues in 1987 (from Rolls* et al. *1989)*

	Mean score*
Choice of features	
To present new and interesting ideas	3·9
To give a sound factual basis	3·7
To clear up confusion	3·0
To provide controversial material	2·8
To give a practical slant	2·4
To give visual appeal	1·8
Choice of writers	
On basis of scientific or medical respectability	2·8
On basis of a good writing style	2·6
On basis of a personal contact	2·3
On basis of articles seen elsewhere	1·8
On basis of appearance of writer in a news item	0·7
Topics considered to be of importance to readers	
Food additives	3·2
Dietary imbalance	3·1
Pesticide residues	1·9
Environmental contamination	1·9
Microbiological contamination	1·7
Industrial contamination	1·4

* Score of 0 for unimportant and score of 5 for very important.

nutritional information they present on their pages was gained from the survey conducted in 1987 by Rolls *et al.* (1989). Unfortunately, only 44% of the 135 questionnaires sent to editors were returned and this casts a certain amount of doubt on whether the replies were representative of the total Media, especially as no replies were received from those magazines which carried the best examples of misinformation! Table 1 summarizes some of the survey's main findings. The emphasis placed on scientific respectability and a sound factual basis for the editor's choice of features and writers almost certainly reflects the fact that the majority of replies were from editors who had most pride in their own good practice. In other words, they are probably not the editors whom Adlai Stevenson described once as sorting the wheat from the chaff and printing the chaff!

The communication process. Both surveys demonstrate the enormous diversity in the quality of nutrition information that exists on both sides of the Atlantic. Some insight into this diversity can be gained by looking at the way in which the basic scientific information can be transformed as it passes through the seven stages of information transfer (see Table 2).

The logical chronological order should be for the scientific facts to be extracted from the peer-reviewed journals into scientific reviews, incorporated into textbooks and consensus reports before finally appearing in the 'popular' press. This order is not always adhered to in the slimming world!

The distortion of the message. Table 3 shows one example of how the primary scientific information can get distorted. The example is taken from the work of David Flint and his

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Table 2. *The seven stages of information transfer*

Stage	
1	Original research papers
2	Scientific reviews
3	Textbooks, consensus reports
4	Popular books
5	Magazines and newspapers
6	Advertisements
7	Gossip, custom and folklore

Table 3. *Case study to show how primary scientific information can be distorted by the media*

Reference	Headline	Quote
Primary source: original research paper		
Flint *et al.* (1986)	Stimulating and cytotoxic effects of an antiserum to adipocyte plasma membranes on adipose tissue metabolism 'in vitro' and 'in vivo'	'Antibodies to rat adipocyte plasma membranes, raised in sheep, had a dual effect in vitro. . . . When injected into rats for 4 days, the antiserum produced gross abnormality of adipose tissue depots. Preliminary observations suggest that such treatment results in long term reduction of the number of adipocytes in internal fat depots.'
Secondary source: scientific reviews		
Flint *et al.* (1987)	Can obesity be controlled?	'The implications of such an approach to modifying fat deposition are immediately apparent for the meat industry . . . Can this technique be used to reduce human obesity directly? The answer would appear to be yes – eventually. There are two main technical barriers. First to reduce potential side effects, human monoclonal antibodies would be preferable. Second, it is extremely important to know how the body deals with large quantities of fat when it is broken down in this manner.'
Quinternary source: magazines and newspapers		
The Sunday Post (8 December 1989)	Eat to your heart's content	'So far the team have achieved a 30 per cent reduction in cow's total body fat using the new treatment.'
The National Examiner	Melt fat away forever	'The secret of a new miracle vaccine that melts body flab forever has been discovered by researchers who say it can soon be perfected for widespread human use.'

colleagues (Flint *et al.* 1986) who raised antibodies to adipocyte plasma membranes and showed that their injection into rats could cause a gross abnormality of adipose tissue depots after 4 d. When further studies showed that antiserum treatment could reduce the total body fat of rats within 2 months, the scientist himself was prepared to make some

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extrapolations about the potential implications in terms of the treatment of human obesity in a review (Flint *et al.* 1987), but his extrapolations were accompanied by the usual caution and caveats typical of the scientific mind.

This was fortunate because further studies showed that by 6 months the rats had similar amounts of total body fat because some sites had compensated for those which had atrophied and that the injected rats weighed more than control rats because of an increase in lean body mass (Futter & Flint, 1990).

The newspapers which picked up the story early on were much less guarded. The *Scottish Sunday Post* pronounced quite inaccurately that the technique had already been used in cows, and the *American National Examiner* gave the impression that injections to melt away human fat forever were just around the corner. In fact, initial studies on commercial animals have only just been reported (Futter & Flint, 1990), but the direct human application of this research work, if any, will not probably be realized until well into the next century.

Table 2 also shows that the scientific information can get distorted through a further two stages after it appears in the Media. Advertisements will be discussed separately (see p. 486), but the success of an article can be judged by how much publicity it gets and how much the main points in it are subsequently passed from one person to another in the form of idle gossip. One editor I met described this as the 'Hey, Doreen' factor, i.e. the likelihood of a lady under the hairdryer leaning across to her neighbour and drawing her attention to something in her magazine. Information acquired in this way will soon be custom and gospel within the same generation, and become folklore when it is passed down generations.

Table 4 is a case study from my own research which shows how a message can become distorted in passing from the primary source to more remote sources, and how the degree of distortion depends on the channel of communication. This example is probably quite unique. My own career-change into the world of the Media (when I was Principal of the Good Housekeeping Institute from 1986 to 1988) gave me the rare opportunity of having more or less complete editorial control over one particular magazine article in which the Beauty Editor of *Good Housekeeping* reported my own research findings on fat distribution from the Dunn Nutrition Unit in Cambridge (Lane, 1988). The *Good Housekeeping* article showed minimal distortion of the message compared with that in the *Cachet* article by Hodgkinson (1986), over which I had no control (neither had I much recollection of the telephone interview on which the article was based). Although the 'gossip' has been imagined, I hope that this example shows how important the accuracy and the 'slant' of the magazine's editorial can be in the ensuing stages of the communication process. Sloppy editorial makes for sloppy gossip and complete distortion of the message.

The first two case studies have merely demonstrated the effect that inaccurate or sensational reporting can have on the distortion of the scientific message. Two extra dimensions can be added to the distortion and this is best seen in the reporting of consensus reports, where balanced judgements have to be made about the available scientific evidence, especially when these come from Government departments. Mischievous slants can often be given by journalists who want to score political points against either the Government or the giants of industry, or both. The publication of consensus reports is also frequently subject to leaks which can further distort the real message if the leaks happen to be inaccurate, intentionally or otherwise.

A wonderful example of this phenomena was the publication of the Department of

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Table 4. *How primary scientific information may or may not get distorted by the time it reaches septenary gossip*

Primary information from original research paper	Quinternary magazine information	Septenary 'gossip' that could be imagined
Example 1 Twenty-eight women presenting for routine computed tomography, had their waist, hip and thigh circumferences measured.' (Ashwell *et al.* 1985)	Good 'Dr Ashwell and her co-worker at Addenbrooke's Hospital used a special computerised scan to examine cross sections of the abdomen just below the waist.' (Lane, 1988)	Good 'They've got this computer which can look at cross-sections of your tummy.'
	Bad 'Thanks to a new technique developed at Cambridge, called computer thermography, a scanner can 'cut' slices through the body to see how and whether fat cells differ.' (Hodgkinson, 1986)	Bad 'They've got this computer which heats you, cuts you up into slices and looks at your fat cells.'
Example 2 'The metabolic complications of obesity, which are associated with a high ratio of waist to hip circumference, may therefore relate specifically to the amount of intra-abdominal fat.' (Ashwell *et al.* 1985)	Good 'Apples (those with the biggest waist measurements in comparison to hips) tended to have more metabolic abnormalities, such as higher levels of cholesterol, glucose and insulin in the blood, which contribute to the development of heart disease, stroke, arteriosclerosis and diabetes.' (Lane, 1988)	Good 'Apples, that's people with big waists and little hips, tend to get lots of illnesses.'
	Bad 'Did you know that above-the-waist fat has a quite different chemical composition to below-waist fat or that the above-waist sort can predispose you to certain illnesses?' (Hodgkinson, 1986)	Bad 'All the fat above your waist has got nasty chemicals in it which might make you ill.'

Health and Social Security (1989) Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy report on dietary sugars and human diseases. Table 5 shows how the Media reported the consensus view on the relationship between the consumption of sugars and the development of obesity. The report was actually published on 12 December 1989, but it was leaked in November by *The Sunday Express* carrying the story that sugar was bad news on all counts, obesity and diabetes as well as dental disease. Further leaks at the beginning of December carried a different story: sugar was bad for teeth but did not

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Table 5. *Case study showing Press coverage of the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy (COMA) report on dietary sugars and human disease (Department of Health and Social Security, 1989) (with particular reference to obesity)*

Date	Source	Headline	Quote
19 November 1989	*The Sunday Express*	A sweet life can be bad for you	'Strong advice to people to limit their sugar consumption will be given in a Government report at the end of the month.'
			'Some doctors and nutritionists claim that eating too much sugar robs the body of essential vitamins and trace elements and contributes to health problems such as obesity and diabetes.'
4 December 1989	*The Times*	Sugar not to blame	'The report says sugar does not contribute to heart disease, diabetes, strokes, cancer, high blood pressure or obesity despite the claims often made against it.'
4 December 1989	*Daily Star*	Sugar fans sweet news	'Boffins have come up with a spoonful of good news . . . Sugar DOESN'T make you fat!'
12 December 1989	*The Independent*	Why sugar stays sweetish	'Of sugar and obesity, one (scientist) said to me "I was prepared to put my name to the report on condition that if you read it carefully, you will see that there is a link between sugar and obesity. But this was being obscured in the drafting" . . . The message about sugar has not been put across to the public because the sugar industry defends its interests with legitimate skill and great energy.'
12 December 1989	COMA report on dietary sugars and human disease (conclusions and recommendations)		'Dietary sugars may contribute to the general excess food energy consumption responsible for the development of obesity. This condition plays an important part in the aetiology of a number of diseases . . . The Panel endorses the need for the obese to reduce energy consumption and recommends that the reduction of non-milk extrinsic sugars intake should be part of a general reduction in energy intake.'
12 December 1989	Department of Health and Social Security Press release	Report on dietary sugars and human disease published	'Sugars can contribute to obesity and overweight, as can almost any food. People who are trying to lose weight should reduce their sugar intake as well as their total food intake.'
13 December 1989	*The Daily Telegraph*	Sugar is bad for teeth but no danger to health	'On obesity, the report said sugar could contribute to excess consumption responsible for putting on weight but was no more likely to cause obesity than other calorific foods.'
13 December 1989	*Daily Mirror*	Sweet OK for sugar	'Sugar may rot your teeth but it won't make you ill, Government medical experts said yesterday.'

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Table 5. *(continued)*

Date	Source	Headline	Quote
13 December 1989	*The Guardian*	Chief medical officer disputes Government statement	'Sir Donald Acheson described the "indirect link" between sugar and a number of serious diseases and drew specific attention to the report's conclusion that sugar may contribute to excess food consumption and obesity.'
13 December 1989	*The Times*	Smeared by the Sourpuss	'The report pointed out that excess sugar can lead to obesity and that obesity is widely agreed to play a part in a number of ailments . . . A most sober, fair well-founded verdict, you would say. But you reckon without the wowsers and their implacable determination to reject any findings . . . that do not correspond entirely and exactly to the wowsers' demands. And if all else fails, try questioning somebody's integrity.'

contribute directly to obesity. These leaks were a pretty accurate account of what the report actually said and what most of the papers reported afterwards. However, on the morning the report was launched, a different kind of story was published in *The Independent*, one which implied that the report did not truly reflect what some of the committee actually thought about the link between sugar and obesity. Thus, the article rubbished the report before it was published and implied that the committee had been corrupted by the sugar industry and the pro-food industry Government. Apart from suggesting that the scientists themselves disagree, another technique that journalists sometimes use to heighten impact is to make out that Government officials disagree. *The Guardian* report (13 December) pointed out the supposed discrepancy between the Chief Medical Officer's version of the report's findings and what it actually said. A week later, another journalist (*The Times*) entered the fray and accused his colleagues of questioning the integrity of the people associated with the report, thus adding further confusion to an already muddled area.

One interesting point to emerge from this case study is that the 'popular' newspapers gave the most accurate account of the report, whilst some of the 'quality' newspapers were most guilty of mischievous and inaccurate reporting.

Bridging the gap between science and the Media: reducing the distortion. It could be said that public misperception about food and nutrition issues would not arise if the public learned about science directly from the scientists rather than from the non-scientific communicators in the Media. We only have to look at the essential characteristics of the three 'stereotypes' (Table 6) to see why this cannot happen easily. For each characteristic, the scientists are at variance with both the journalists and the consumers. Hence a big gap exists between the scientists and the public.

It is extremely difficult for a nutritionist to bridge this gap and be a good public communicator without, at the same time, losing the respect of his or her scientific colleagues.

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Table 6. *Stereotypical characteristics of scientists, journalists and consumers*

Characteristic	Scientists	Journalists	Consumers
Like hard, technical data	Yes	No	No
Like soft, emotional stuff	No	Yes	Yes
Like reading lots of details	Yes	No	No
Like sense of urgency and working to tight deadlines	No	Yes	n/a
Like personalization of data	No	Yes	Yes
Like sitting on the fence (i.e. like the 'grey')	Yes	No	No
Like looking at extremities (i.e. like the 'black' and the 'white')	No	Yes	Yes
Like qualifiers and uncertainties	Yes	No	No
Prefer the outrage to the hazard	No	Yes	Yes
Prefer the euphoria to the gain	No	Yes	Yes

n/a, Not applicable.

'Popularization' is the usual name for the activity of communicating beyond the peer group; it has been said that those who can do, and those who can't popularize what others do. Some scientists believe that contact with the Media tarnishes the purity of the academic image and fear that it involves loss of control. Fame and notoriety are both ways of being well known and the line between the two can be quite thin at times. This is too big a risk for many to take; they are prepared to leave it to professional popularizers and communicators. Having joined these ranks in the last few years, I feel I have some obligation to pass on some of the lessons I have learned from personal experience.

Table 7 lists my 'ten commandments' for communicating the nutritional message in an interview situation. They are gleaned from what I have learned so far about communicating the general risks and benefits associated with food and nutrition and they certainly apply to any interview that I have ever done on slimming. Strangely enough, they are not too dissimilar from the two golden rules for crisis management: emphasize your commitment and maintain control at all times.

Another scientist who has personal Media experience is Kristen McNutt; she has also written extensively on her own solutions to these problems. Table 8 shows her own tips for communicating effectively with journalists in relation to the written word. She believes that getting any nutrition coverage at all is of benefit to nutrition science and that scientists should be prepared to bite their critical tongues on occasions if only trivial points are inaccurate.

Table 9 shows how McNutt takes this one stage further in suggesting ways in which scientists and journalists can actually help each other.

ADVERTISING

Importance of advertisements and advertorials.

The success of any magazine, newspaper or radio or television programme is judged by the readership of that magazine or the viewing figures of the programme. Circulation

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Table 7. *The ten commandments for communicating the nutritional message*

1.	Don't pooh-pooh the outrage or the euphoria which often feature more strongly than the scientific hazard or gain Pretend you understand it and have sympathy with it. Then get down to talking about the risk or the benefit in terms of the hazard or the gain
2.	Reduce the outrage or the euphoria Make the scientific data about the hazard or the gain into a story which is more interesting than the outrage or the euphoria
3.	Distract from the outrage or the euphoria Put the food risk or benefit into perspective with other non-food-related risks or benefits
4.	Make the 'middle of the road' position more interesting Veer as near to the 'gutters' at the edge of the road as your scientific integrity will allow
5.	Simplify your story as much as you can It's better that you do this than the person who listens to you. Don't give any opportunities for the 'Chinese Whispers' syndrome
6.	Make your story more consumer-friendly Insert as many everyday analogies as you can
7.	Personalize your story as much as you dare Talk about your grandmother or your kids or give personal anecdotes (even if you have to make them up sometimes!)
8.	Raise excitement about your qualifiers and uncertainties Don't allow them to spoil and distract from your story
9.	Use your sense of humour Slip in at least one funny. It's easier on some nutritional topics than others (e.g. 'fibre') but it always helps the memorability factor
10.	Build consumer trust and credibility Do this gradually, and don't ever demand it at the outset

figures (the number of copies actually sold) are multiplied by a figure of anywhere between 2 and 10 (based on market research) to calculate readership figures. Sales of newspapers or magazines do not, by themselves, generate the major part of the financial resources for the operation, but the readership figures, and the 'quality' of the readership in terms of their interests and spending ability, are an extremely powerful tool to woo potential advertisers. Most consumer magazines obtain well over half their revenue from their advertising income and a monthly magazine like *Good Housekeeping* can carry more than one million pounds worth of advertising in one issue. Current rates (1990) are about £3000–3500 for a full page colour advertisement, but this rate can be greater if the advertisement is placed to face certain editorial matter rather than other advertisements. Thus, an editor can decide that an advertisement for a 'slimming' product can be placed next to editorial matter about slimming even if the two bear no relation to each other.

Advertorials are extremely popular with the publishers of magazines. Their correct name is advertisement features or promotions but the hybrid name of advertorial (i.e. a cross between an advertisement and editorial) has stuck too well to disappear now. They are welcomed by both editors and publishers because they provide a good source of income but allow the magazine to have more than usual control over the total visual effect. (Editors hate having a rather gaudy advertisement facing editorial matter with

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Table 8. *How nutritionists can communicate effectively with journalists (adapted from McNutt & Sloan, 1985)*

1.	Give compliments to journalists whenever possible and offer only constructive criticism when necessary ('You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar')
2.	Don't engage in trivial pursuits, i.e. criticizing trivial points rather than applauding coverage of major concepts. If Media writers convey the general importance of nutrition, despite some minor factual errors, large numbers of people will be reached and nutritionists will benefit
3.	Start by influencing those journalists who are sincerely interested in nutrition rather than sensation. Success is more likely here and the effect more worth while
4.	Appreciate the importance of audience appeal and appropriateness; the scientific data must have 'value' with people's daily lives
5.	Know your own facts, especially if the story is at the cutting edge of advances in knowledge
6.	Watch your language level. Although health professionals define nutrition as a science, consumers think of nutrition as something that 'is or is not a food'
7.	Make full use of titles, coverlines and blurbs. These are all techniques to catch the audience's attention and to increase the probability that the message will be read. Accepting the somewhat sensational title for greater readership of the qualifying copy is a worthwhile compromise
8.	Acknowledge the importance of the tightness of a story in terms of space and the competition that exists in the Media for any exposure at all
9.	Remember the importance of accountability in both camps. Nutritionists who consistently hamper the effectiveness of journalists (i.e. in attracting an audience and continuing to bring it back) can damage the credibility of others
10.	Build up a climate of mutual trust and co-operation. This atmosphere may ultimately result in collaborative efforts that serve the public better as well as advance the goals of both nutritionists and journalists

Table 9. *How nutritionists and journalists can help each other (adapted from McNutt, 1990)*

1.	Invite journalists to speak at scientific meetings or offer workshops as effective techniques for working with the Media
2.	Write love letters commending journalists for well-written articles; make sure that your letter comes to the attention of that person's boss
3.	Use copies of articles or tapes of radio/TV shows as consumer education materials for students, consumers and clients
4.	Read Media reports to keep up to date on the latest research reported at conferences you cannot afford to attend
5.	Allow journalists to present perspectives which broaden your appreciation of points of view different from your own

delicate, expensive photographs!) They are also welcomed by the advertisers because they enable several of them to join together to produce an impressive colour advertisement which they might not be able to justify individually.

Thus, an advertisement promotion can look, to all intents and purposes, like a regular feature in the magazine (same design, layout, photographic style etc), but the advertising

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copy has been heavily disguised. Surveys of magazine readers show that a good proportion do not realize that advertorials are hidden advertisements and that most readers started reading them unaware that they have not been written by the editorial staff of the magazine. Although the same rules and regulations apply to advertorials as advertisements (see following discussion), they perhaps offer a greater potential for misleading readers than either editorial or advertising. Furthermore, the advent of satellite and cable TV might bring with them the potential for many more magazine programmes 'on air' which are run with the aid of general sponsors and are, therefore, more akin to advertorials.

ADVERTISING CONTROLS

Self-regulation. Advertisements for slimming, like all other advertisements and advertorials in newspapers and consumer magazines and in posters and leaflets, have to conform with the British Code of Advertising Practice (BCAP; Committee of Advertising Practice, 1988) which has been in existence since the early 1960s. Television and radio commercials must comply with a similar voluntary code operated by the Independent Broadcasting Authority. The salient points in the BCAP that relate to slimming are summarized in Table 10, but the reader is referred to Section C. IV of the BCAP (Committee of Advertising Practice, 1988) for the complete text.

If an organization, or a member of the public, feels that a particular advertisement is in breach of the Code, the complaint is investigated by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) which is responsible for the BCAP. In a 3-year period (1986–1989), the ASA received 103 complaints relating to slimming. Many of these were duplications, but of those investigated, forty-seven were upheld and twenty were not. Surprisingly, there were more complaints about the non-arrival of ordered products than there were about ineffectual products.

One of the major problems is that not all elements of the Press abide by the Code to the same degree. Many publishers of 'free' magazines such as those handed out in abundance at London Underground Stations belong to The Association of Free Sheet Publishers which has agreed to abide by the Code. However, these publications need their advertisers much more than their regular readers and tend to be the worst offenders against the Code. A complaint against an advert appearing in *Ms London* for a Slimming Clinic was upheld by the ASA because it claimed to treat obesity, strictly prohibited by the Code. However, this advert and many like it have continued to proliferate and influence a group who are particularly vulnerable to, and probably least in need of, this type of advertising.

If an advertiser refuses to amend or withdraw an advertisement found to breach the Code, a general Press warning against the advertiser is issued. Such behaviour could eventually result in an injunction being granted from the High Court to the Office of Fair Trading under the Misleading Advertisement Regulations (Statutory Instruments, 1988). These came into force on 20 June 1988, implementing the EC Directive on Misleading Advertising. The Regulations are there to support and reinforce existing advertising controls, not to replace them. The Director-General of Fair Trading has the power to step in if the public interest requires that offending advertisements should be stopped by means of a court injunction. However, he can act only when a complaint has been received. To come within his scope, an advertisement must be misleading (i.e. must

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Table 10. *Some salient points from The British Code of Advertising Practice (Section C.IV Slimming; Committee of Advertising Practice, 1988)*

1. Advertisements must conform not only to the rules set out in the section on slimming, but also to the letter and spirit of all other relevant sections of the Code
2. Obesity is a condition requiring medical attention and treatment. No claims referring to obesity should be made in advertisements directed to the general public. Dieters should be advised, in either the advertisement or packaging, to consult their doctors before embarking upon a slimming course.
3. Diet plans and aids to dieting are the only products which may be offered in advertisements as capable of effecting any loss in weight. Claims that weight loss or slimming can be achieved wholly by other means are not acceptable. No advertisement should claim that the product is efficacious for weight loss or figure control merely because a diet plan, diet aids or an exercise scheme is offered with it
4. The advertiser should be able to show that his suggested diet will provide adequate amounts of essential nutrients (such as proteins, vitamins and minerals)

   No claims should be made that a diet contains any ingredient which in itself has the property of hastening the process of weight loss. No 'weight loss' products should be advertised on the basis of claims such as 'Eat as much as you like' which may have the effect of removing due emphasis from the primary importance of maintaining an appropriate and balanced diet
5. Substantiation relating to any claim for a novel mode of action or increased efficacy should be based upon scientifically acceptable trials on human subjects

   Testimonials from users of a product do not constitute substantiation

   Claims to uniqueness, novelty or a greater degree of efficacy than other products should not be made unless there is adequate substantiation for the product's difference in significant respects from other available slimming products
6. Temporary weight loss can be achieved by the expulsion of water from the body. This should not be represented in advertisements as a method of slimming
7. When a claim is made that any food is an aid to slimming, the Food Labelling Regulations 1984 (Statutory Instruments, 1984) require it to be made clear that the food cannot aid slimming except as part of a diet in which the total intake of calories is controlled whether by calorie-counting, low carbohydrate/high protein or other means
8. For the purpose of the Code, the word 'slim' and compounds such as 'slimming' will be taken, in the context with which the Code is concerned, to imply weight loss. Figure control may be achieved in two ways: through exercise and by garments (e.g. corsetry). The word 'slim' should not be used to describe the effects of either product. Advertisers of corsetry and similar products should take particular care to ensure that no hint or suggestion occurs in either copy or illustration which might lead a reader to suppose that these products make any contribution to weight loss
9. It is possible for exercise to add strength to muscles and thus to aid their power to pull in the bulges which may develop where the muscles are slack. An improvement in posture may also benefit the figure. Exercise may be active or passive. Exercise operates only slowly to improve muscle tone; claims for exercise-based products should not suggest dramatic improvements over short periods
10. Claims in the form (you can) lose (up to) X pounds (or Y inches), look X pounds lighter, (you can) start to slim in X days, how to slim in less than X weeks, lose X inches immediately, etc., should not be made, since the measurements and weights of individuals and their degrees of application vary too widely for such unqualified promises to be capable of fulfilment

deceive or be likely to deceive); and must be published, in connection with a trade, business, craft or profession, to promote the supply or transfer of goods and services.

Since 1988, the ASA has only made two referrals to the Office of Fair Trading; one of these was against a company called Tobyward which advertised a product called Speedslim. This galactomannan-based compound was claimed to place a lining in the

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stomach and intestine so that fats could not be absorbed into the blood-stream and weight could, therefore, be controlled. Should the company re-advertise this product, they could face contempt of Court and a prison sentence.

Specific legislation. Apart from the general provisions of the Misleading Advertising Regulations (Statutory Instruments, 1988), the only elements of slimming advertising which are subject to specific legislation are claims that particular foods are aids to slimming or low in energy. The Food Labelling Regulations 1984 (Statutory Instruments, 1984) require it to be made clear that a food cannot aid slimming except as part of a diet in which the total intake of energy is controlled. Furthermore, for a reduced energy claim to be substantiated, it must not contain more than three-quarters of that of an equivalent weight or volume of a similar food in relation to which no such claim is made. If the claim is that a food has a low energy value, then the energy value of the food must not be more than 1670 KJ (400 kcal)/kg or l, and the energy value of a normal serving of food must not exceed this value either.

CONCLUSIONS

The previously-discussed considerations of editorial and advertising about slimming should be enough to illustrate what a 'hit and miss' approach there is to ensuring the accuracy of the message. In both, self-regulation is, on the whole, the name of the game and there is much scope for the reader or viewer to be totally or utterly misled and confused.

Nutritionists often say there are no such things as good and bad foods, just good and bad diets. Turning this truism on its head, the Media's daily menu cannot be said to be good or bad, but some of the items dished up are likely to be good and tasty, whilst others are likely to be rather unpalatable, if not completely.

I hope I have been able to point out ways in which scientists can help in the communication process and, thus, contribute to the increased 'safety' of the Media.

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