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Jones, Sandra C. and Rossiter, John R.

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Breast cancer detection messages in Australian print media advertising – are they promoting correct information?

Sandra C. Jones¹
Graduate School of Public Health
University of Wollongong

and

John R. Rossiter
Department of Marketing
University of Wollongong

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¹ Sandra C. Jones
Graduate School of Public Health
University of Wollongong
Northfields Ave
Wollongong NSW 2522
AUSTRALIA
Phone +61 2 9580 6999
Fax +61 2 9580 3311
Email sandraj@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

With breast cancer now the leading cause of cancer deaths among women in the western world, correct information about detection and treatment is vitally important. The media are often accused of conveying inaccurate information in their editorial coverage of health issues, but few studies have examined the accuracy of information in media advertising. In this study of breast cancer detection ads in Australian magazines and newspapers, many instances of misleading information were found. As the print media have a major influence on women's health beliefs, these findings have serious implications for health communication policy regarding socially responsible advertising.

Keywords: social marketing, advertising, breast cancer

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to conduct an analysis of breast cancer detection (screening) messages currently presented to women in Australian print media advertisements. This is a very important issue because early detection of breast cancers by mammographic screening has the potential to dramatically reduce mortality rates. Compliance with screening recommendations is quite evidently associated with women's awareness of these recommendations, and with their knowledge of the risk factors for breast cancer and perceptions of survivability (Meissner et al., 1992; Pearlman et al., 1999).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that many women harbour serious misperceptions about breast cancer, particularly in relation to their likelihood of developing breast cancer (Skinner et al., 1998; Paul et al., 1999); the relevant risk factors (Johnson et al., 1999); and the recommended target group and interval for screening (Barratt et al., 1998). Additionally, the 1996 Australian Breast Health Survey found that many women in Australia want more information about breast cancer screening (Barratt et al., 1997). There is an obvious need for clear, accurate information about breast cancer and breast cancer screening to be disseminated to Australian women (NHMRC National Breast Cancer Centre, 1997).

The media are an important source of health information for many women, and may have a considerable impact on perceptions of susceptibility and appropriate health-protective behaviours. In the mid-1990s, an Australian survey of 3,000 well women found that "the media" was the most common source of advice about breast cancer (Barratt et al., 1997). In the U.S., magazines have been found to be the third most important source of cancer information for women (Meissner et al., 1992), and would likely rank highly as an information source for Australian women.

Australia's National Breast Cancer Centre (NBCC) was established in 1995 and a review was conducted of breast cancer coverage in the media during the 3-month period immediately prior to NBCC's establishment (NHMRC National Breast Cancer Centre, 1999). The review

included a sample of metropolitan, rural and suburban newspapers and the three top-selling women's magazines (*The Australian Women's Weekly*, *New Idea* and *Woman's Day*), covering 333 articles,² and concluded that media coverage of breast cancer was contrary to that which would encourage screening among at-risk women and the use of support services among women with breast cancer. However, the review specifically excluded advertising messages. Health advertisements would seem to be particularly important because their sources are usually health authorities or well-regarded corporate sponsors, which can be expected to have high credibility.

The present study covered all advertisements appearing in the top-selling women's magazines in Australia which made any reference to breast cancer, with the purpose being to identify and analyse messages about mammographic screening for breast cancer.

Method

In the 6-month period from December 2000 to May 2001, all issues of 10 leading Australian women's magazines³ and three weekend newspapers were examined for breast cancer-related advertisements. The magazines surveyed were *Australian Women's Weekly* (circulation = 703,929), *Woman's Day* (570,824), *Readers Digest* (463,414)⁴, *That's Life* (405,000+), *New Idea* (401,000+), *Take 5* (206,764), *Cleo* (206,023), *Who Weekly* (198,897), *Dolly* (163,416), and *Girlfriend* (118,500+).⁵ The newspapers surveyed were the weekend issues of the national newspaper (*The Australian*) and the two Western Australian newspapers (*The West Australian* and *The Sunday Times*), which are typical of the papers distributed and read in the states and territories.

Results

A total of 31 breast cancer-related advertisements were identified in the 6-month period. The advertisements were part of five separate campaigns, two of which were run in a range of publications.

BreastScreen Australia – The most frequently occurring ad was for the BreastScreen Australia campaign, appearing a total of 16 times in the 6-month period. BreastScreen Australia is a joint program of the Commonwealth and State/Territory governments, which provides free biennial mammographies for all women over the age of 40, and promotes free biennial mammographies specifically to all women over the age of 50.⁶ This ad can be regarded as the “gold standard” in that the messages in this ad are those sanctioned by the policy makers based on extensive research and consultation.

² The number of breast cancer articles was inflated by a medical negligence case taking place at the time of the review; 111 of the 333 articles were about this case.

³ Based on circulation figures for the six months to 31/12/00; Australian circulation only.

⁴ This is not a “women's” magazine per se, but was included due to its high circulation.

⁵ The latter two are the two leading magazines targeting teenage girls in Australia.

⁶ The availability of free mammograms for women aged 40–49 is not promoted due to the controversy about the efficacy of screening for this age group (NHMRC National Breast Cancer Centre, 1999).

The ad features a photograph of Sara Henderson, a well-known Australian author and outback property owner, who has survived breast cancer, with the headline “If you’re a woman and you’re over 50 read this now.” The text of the ad states:

One woman in twelve develops breast cancer. Most of these women are over 50.

The biggest risk factor is age, not family history. In fact, for 9 out of 10 women breast cancer is not hereditary.

Early detection is your best protection, giving you the best opportunity for successful treatment and recovery. And when you’re over 50, the best way to detect it early is with a screening mammogram. A mammogram can find a cancer as small as a grain of rice. That’s long before you’ll feel it.

Free screening mammograms are available through BreastScreen Australia and now there is a service near you. So don’t put it off a minute longer. If you’re over 50 call 13 20 50 to make an appointment now.

The main focus of the ad is the promotion of mammographic screening for women over 50: there are statements about the efficacy of mammograms for detecting breast cancer; the availability of free mammograms; and a call to action. Note that the phrase “over 50” appears in the ad a total of four times.

Fashion Targets Breast Cancer – This was the second most frequently occurring campaign, with a total of seven ads during the 6-month period. Fashion Targets Breast Cancer (FTBC) is a fund-raising campaign, also currently running in a number of countries (including the US and the UK), which raises money by selling t-shirts with the FTBC logo. There are four versions of this ad, each featuring a different celebrity. The main text of the ad is identical in all versions, but each includes an additional quote or statement from the featured celebrity. The headline of the ads is “Buy a T-shirt. Show you care.”

New Idea Wesley Breast Cancer Hotline – This ad appeared a total of five times (twice in December and three times in March), exclusively in the magazine *New Idea*. The ad features a full-page picture of an unclothed woman with her hand on her right breast, and the headline “Now, help and information are just a call away.” The “hotline” is a freecall advice line for women who have questions about breast cancer.

Avon – This ad appeared twice during the 6-month period, both times in Woman’s Day (once each in December and January). The two-page ad is designed to encourage women to participate in clinical trials, and includes a full-page reproduction of a letter from a clinical trial participant, whose breast cancer was detected by a mammogram at age 45, and a page that clearly identifies Avon as the sponsor of the campaign.

Breast Cancer Institute of Australia – this ad appeared once, in the *Sunday Times*, and was timed to coincide with Mother’s Day (Sunday 13 May, 2001). The photograph in the ad is of a hand-made gift decorated by a child – an unidentifiable oval-shaped brown object, decorated with glitter, raw pasta, pipe cleaners, paper stars and flowers, and a plastic lion. The headline reads “Give every mum something special this Mother’s Day with a donation to the Breast

Cancer Institute of Australia.” The purpose of this ad is clearly fundraising and, again, the ad includes a call to action, and action facilitation (by the provision of a 1300 telephone number).⁷

Consistency of the messages

The two main messages in the BreastScreen Australia ad – messages approved by experts and the government health authorities – are that breast cancer is age-related (most women who develop breast cancer are over 50), and that biennial mammographic screening is the best protection (early detection provides the best opportunity for successful treatment and recovery). The other important factual messages in this ad are the high level of incidence (one in 12 Australian women will develop breast cancer), and that most breast cancers (9 out of 10) are not hereditary.

The other ads are assessed below on the basis of promoting these four messages.

Age: None of the other advertisements mentioned the age-related nature of breast cancer. Only one ad featured a breast cancer patient, and she was aged 45 at diagnosis. Of the other five photographs of women in the ads, only two were of women who appeared to be aged over 50.

Screening: Only one ad (Avon) mentioned mammographic screening, and this was in relation to a 45-year-old woman (i.e., younger than the recommended screening age).

Lifetime risk: The only ads that mentioned the lifetime risk of breast cancer (FTBC) gave it as one in 11 (which is fairly close to the sanctioned one in 12). It is unfortunate that in one version of this ad the admired spokesperson, Maggie Tabberer, is quoted as saying that one in 11 women will “lose the battle” with breast cancer, which could be interpreted to mean that one in 11 women (that is, all those who develop breast cancer) die from it; this is clearly an error in the copy, but it has the potential to increase the perception of breast cancer as an unavoidably fatal disease.

Breast cancer and heredity: None of the ads mentioned that the majority of breast cancer cases are not hereditary.

Implications

Given that breast cancer, and specifically increased breast cancer screening, is one of the highest priority areas for women’s health in Australia, it appears from this review that health advertisers need to be encouraged to provide accurate information on key issues related to breast cancer and to include information on breast cancer screening. Particularly, advertisers should be encouraged to include statements about the age-related risk of breast cancer and the importance of mammographic screening of women over 50, which has repeatedly been shown to be the best method currently available for reducing breast cancer mortality. Health advertisements are typically placed by health authorities or well-regarded sponsors, with high credibility. It is these advertisers’ social responsibility to ensure that the information they provide is accurate.

⁷ 1300 numbers are charged at the cost of a local call.

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