

## Truth in Advertising

One of the issues most often addressed when readers have the chance to give me feedback about the journal relates to the volume of advertising we include. The *Oncology Nursing Forum (ONF)* enjoys wonderful advertiser support, and readers are the direct beneficiaries of that support. Occasionally, however, a certain ad or type of ad is called into question. Over the past few months, this has been the case for one particular type of ad—those for ingestible forms of alternative and complementary medicines. After numerous deliberations and consultation with oncology nurse experts, the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) Board of Directors, and A. J. Jannetti, Inc. (our advertising representatives), the *ONF* Editorial Board decided to exclude ads for this category of products. A letter to the editor in this issue explains the specific concerns that were brought to our attention last fall and resulted in our deliberations and eventual decision. To date, only this product, among the many that are currently available, has been advertised in *ONF*. However, we anticipate an increase in requests.

It is important to understand that this decision in no way represents a rejection of the potential benefits to patients from the use of the many products currently available. We are fully supportive of research to examine the effectiveness of these products in regard to symptom management, health promotion, and, even in some cases, antitumor activity. We also recognize our role in disseminating scientifically based information and in educating readers about these preparations, their appropriate use, and the ramifications of their use. Sessions related to these products have been held at ONS Congresses and the Institutes of Learning; ONS has published a comprehensive book on the topic; ONS's educational blueprint has prioritized the topic; and every issue of our sister journal, the *Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing*, provides a column on a different product. The question for us was not **do** we need to provide information but rather **how** best to deliver it. We are committed to providing peer-reviewed information on all topics and have decided, for the

time being, that **advertisements will not be considered part of the process of informing readers about complementary medicines.**

During the decision-making process, we asked ourselves a number of questions that I assume readers automatically will want to ask. The answers we arrived at made our decisions more informed.

*Why do we accept advertising from pharmaceutical companies for drugs but not from companies that produce nutraceuticals and herbal and natural products?*

Drugs are subjected to Food and Drug Administration (FDA) scrutiny prior to being made available for prescription and sale. Although that process sometimes is admittedly flawed, at least it is rigorous and well regulated. No such process exists for the myriad of over-the-counter products categorized as dietary supplements. In addition, no process exists for ensuring standardization of dose for these products. Seldom do the bottles of these preparations contain clear dosage recommendations or any contraindications. In other words, prescription and use of these bioactive agents is, for the most part, unregulated. As an editorial board, we would find it difficult to scrutinize and evaluate the claims and content of every ad. When an outside authority, such as the FDA, accepts some responsibility for that type of scrutiny, as they do with drugs, our efforts to disseminate quality advertising are made easier. No such assurances are available for the ads supplied for nonregulated products.

*Why do we not use our existing advertising process to screen these ads like all others?*

Current processes are based, in part, on FDA oversight of drugs. Our advertising criteria and policies would need to be reevaluated and embellished to accommodate these ads. Before initiating that rather time-consuming effort, we decided to wait until we reconsidered the moratorium. When we need it, we will build it.

*Why don't we just let the readers take the responsibility for evaluating the trustworthiness of ads?*

We do want readers to take responsibility for judging any ad! We provide numerous

disclaimers to convey that, just because we advertise something, we are not somehow granting it approval. Nevertheless, we are concerned about that portion of our readership that may believe that "if it is in the *Forum*, then it must be true." Each of you has a responsibility to evaluate for yourself the claims made in any article or advertisement. We have partners in this endeavor—peer reviewers, the FDA, the Editorial Board, our professional advertising representatives—but that does not relieve us of our individual responsibility. When evaluating whether an herbal product or nutraceutical is worthwhile, evaluate its benefits and risks systematically.

- **What** are the claims made, and how reliable are they? Are the benefits claimed specific to a patient's situation? Are the claims based on scientific method, or are the reports anecdotal and based on one or two people who tried it?
- **Why** does this preparation work? Has this rationale been established using a scientific process?
- **Who** is making the claims? The patient's cousin's friend's mother? The manufacturer? If so, what are the company's credentials?
- **How much** can be taken? How much is enough? How much is too much? Can you really trust that a preparation that is supposed to have effects against serious illness has no side effects? Is there a potential for interaction with anything else that the patient is using for treatment or for any other reason?
- **When** and for **how long** is the preparation to be taken? Once again, has the dose and its schedule been established scientifically?
- **Where** does one obtain the preparation, and how much does it cost "cash-strapped" patients?

In the months ahead, we often will be discussing how professionals evaluate evidence. These principles will apply to more than treatment protocols and nursing interventions and outcomes. Using these tools to become a critical thinker will benefit all those around you, patients and colleagues alike.