

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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## “Cancer Center Ads: Are they Truthful ?”

Today, advertising has become known for being misleading and deceptive. But, could this also be the case for such serious topics as so-called "cancer centers?" Sadly, the answer is "Yes." In May of 2014, a study in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* raised difficult questions about the medical content—or lack of it—in print and TV ads run by both profit and nonprofit cancer centers, including many of the most prestigious hospitals in the United States. Usually, these ads imply that a given hospital offers superior treatment in an effort to win cancer patients' business, yet no data and scant facts are given to support such implied claims. Thus, ethical concerns have been raised. Most ads resorted to emotional appeals to kindle hope of survival in patients facing difficult times. Investigators found that confusing copy often implied that a given center offered better odds of survival than competitors, but did not include actual survival data for the ad sponsor's own patients. An analysis of over 400 ads from over 100 cancer hospitals, found most (88%) promoted cancer treatments, but only 18% promoted cancer screening and even fewer (13%) promoted support services. And, of those ads that promoted cancer treatments, 57% mentioned treatment for a specific type of cancer and only 9% mentioned cancer stage, only 2% quantified the benefits and only 5% mentioned cost. Nearly one half of the ads used patient testimonials, whereby former patients spoke of being "cured" of cancer and of a hospital or treatment as being "miraculous," "remarkable," or "extraordinary." These emotional appeals seemed to be uncoupled from actual information about quality and costs in the ads, even in some of the most prestigious nonprofit cancer centers. Dr Santa wrote on the *Consumer Reports* website, "Their goal is to sell their product regardless of risk or cost....even the best of ads contain a kernel of truth surrounded by deceit and exaggeration." Most cancer centers do not publish survival data to back up their emotional appeals. A 2012 Attadale Partners survey of 94 cancer centers found that only 12% reported survival data for a single type of cancer, 18% reported data for more than one type of cancer, and 69% didn't report any survival data. Given this, how would publishing survival data help a patient seeking to improve her odds? Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center in Boston, Massachusetts, for one, has concluded that it wouldn't—and furthermore, that publishing survival data, however good, could be used against them by competitors, who may cherry-pick patients to include to improve their numbers.

In the America that I love, we are desperate for truth in advertising. So, why can't advertisers simply tell people the truth? Is it for profits?

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