

Comment

Media hostility compounded by Vioxx case

As the Australian class action against Merck Sharp & Dohme over withdrawn product **Vioxx** (rofecoxib) continued in the Federal Court last week, so did the barrage of damaging media stories.

Perhaps most hurtful to the cause of pharma industry ethics in general was the admission of ethical failure from publishers Elsevier over the publication of a contracted journal under the title *The Australasian Journal of Bone and Joint Medicine* which gave every appearance of being an independent scientific publication.

In reality it consisted of articles concerning Vioxx and **Fosamax** (alendronate) sourced from other journals. The fact that it was funded by Merck was not disclosed at the time of publication.

"Elsevier's high standards for disclosure were not followed in this instance. Accuracy and transparency are at the core of what we do and the publications in question clearly failed to meet those standards. While the lack of disclaimers is not acceptable, this all took place several years ago and these publications were discontinued," the publisher said.

Merck said the publication was a "complimentary journal" containing articles from other peer-reviewed publications but in the wake of the story, it was widely interpreted as a questionable marketing ploy.

Meanwhile, MSD's counsel has been making the case that studies showing cardiovascular risks from Vioxx use are not proof the arthritis drug caused lead plaintiff Graeme Peterson's heart attack and, in any case, duty of care passed was on to doctors after registration of the drug by the Therapeutic Goods Administration. These points were included in the court reporting but they already have a narrow legalistic air compared to reporting of the plaintiff's opening arguments.

The Peterson case is worth reflecting on in the light of information released this week showing the pharmaceutical industry is already at odds with the press and has a long way to go to win the trust of reporters.

A report, based on a survey of 64 journalists by PR firm Ethical Strategies, shows a strong entrenched bias against pharma among mainstream media.

Releasing the report, Managing Director of Ethical Strategies, John Morton, said there is a deep divide between what industry does and what the consumer press believes it does and, among reporters in particular, misunderstanding and prejudice are rampant.

"You are dealing with people who are fundamentally opposed to what the industry stands for. They believe companies have abused a privileged position."

So far, the Vioxx class action has done nothing to rid reporters of this simple but damning idea. In fact, there is no reason to believe the case - no matter what its outcome - will do anything but entrench the hostility to industry so clear from the way it has been reported so far.