

RGH Pharmacy E-Bulletin

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A joint initiative of the Patient Services Section and the Drug and Therapeutics Information Service of the Pharmacy Department, Repatriation General Hospital, Daw Park, South Australia. The RGH Pharmacy E-Bulletin is distributed in electronic format on a weekly basis, and aims to present concise, factual information on issues of current interest in therapeutics, drug safety and cost-effective use of medications.

Editor: Assoc. Prof. Chris Alderman, University of South Australia – Director of Pharmacy, RGH
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Christmas Edition – Best wishes for the festive season

With glossal appendage firmly implanted in the buccal mucosa, respected medical researchers have announced the formation of a new niche company: *HARLOT*, specialising in *How to Achieve positive Results without actually Lying to Overcome the Truth*. Far be it from us at RGH to endorse the proposed techniques (some of which are detailed below, purely for information purposes), but some of the methods for casting a positive spin on clinical trial results have uncanny familiarity for those of us who are called upon to interpret the results of research in the area of clinical therapeutics. Approaches advocated by Harlot include:

- *Selective, non-systematic reviews*
Cite only reports that support your product, proposal, or policy (and discredit the competitors)
- *Substitute placebos for an established effective treatment*
Invoke fallacious "placebo effects" and "assay-sensitivity" arguments in order to avoid head to head comparisons
- *Mini-max manipulation of competitor's product*
Give insufficient ("mini") doses of competitor's product, + scary ("max") warnings about the competitor product's side effects and toxicity
- *Shifting the goal posts for "superiority" and "non-inferiority"*
Require trivially better outcomes for "superiority" but massively worse outcomes for "inferiority"
- *Adding efficacious co-interventions to (just) the product under investigation*
Give (just) the experimental patients extra treatments of known efficacy, find and treat their comorbidity, etc
- *Repeated interim analyses*
Scan repeated early analyses for spurious but favourable trends to justify early termination of the trial if this is favourable
- *Over interpretation of a positive trial*
Report only the impressive relative risk reduction while suppressing the unimpressive absolute risk reduction and number needed to treat

The Harlot group do point out that there is always the danger that someone may reveal that the data simply do not support the claims. They suggest that this calls for the most extreme (and costly) service, the SHARKS (Striking Horror And Retreat through Killer Solicitors) squad. These operators are described as "masters at sending terrifying letters, threatening damage suits ... [and] obtaining an injunction prohibiting the release and activation of offending recommendations or other damaging reports." "The objective is not to win the case, but simply to keep everybody from learning that your drug doesn't possess any real advantages until you've sold tonnes of it."

For interested readers who would like to know more, we suggest reading the very humorous and well-written original piece: Sackett DL, Oxman AD. HARLOT plc: an amalgamation of the world's two oldest professions. *BMJ* 2003; 327: 1442 - 1445

We, like you, know that the truth is out there somewhere! On behalf of the Pharmacy Department of the Repatriation General Hospital, we wish all of our readers at RGH, around Australia and around the world a happy and safe Christmas and New Year. There will be a brief pause over the Christmas period, and the E-Bulletin will reappear on Monday January 26 2009.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION – CONTACT THE PHARMACY DEPARTMENT ON 82751763 or email: chris.alderman@rgh.sa.gov.au

Information in this E-Bulletin is derived from critical analysis of available evidence – individual clinical circumstances should be considered when making treatment decisions. You are welcome to forward this e-bulletin by email to others you might feel would be interested, or to print the E-Bulletin for wider distribution. Reproduction of this material is permissible for purposes of individual study or research.