

8 February 2008

Professor Philip Sambrook
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Dear Professor Sambrook

Thank you for your letter of 12 December 2007 regarding *The 7.30 Report* story entitled "Concern over osteoporosis drug", broadcast on 11 December. In keeping with ABC complaint handling procedures, your concerns were referred to Audience and Consumer Affairs (ACA) for investigation, and I sincerely apologise for the delay in providing you with our findings.

We have assessed the broadcast against the requirements of the ABC's Code of Practice (a copy of which is enclosed for your reference), sought feedback from the News division on the matters raised in your correspondence and considered some of the research available on bisphosphonates. I should stress that it is not our role to engage in the debate about the concerns relating to these drugs; our role is to evaluate a broadcast and conclude whether or not it met our editorial standards.

On review, the ABC acknowledges that the report failed to highlight the important distinction between the potential risks associated with cancer patients, who take high doses of bisphosphonates, and the lower risks for osteoporosis patients who are treated with smaller dosages of the drugs. By not making this distinction, the report overstated the potential risks to osteoporosis sufferers, and unduly favoured the view that bisphosphonates present a significant risk to all patients taking the drugs. This constitutes a breach of the impartiality standards for ABC current affairs content, outlined in section 3.4 of the Code. Further, because this information about differential risks was not outlined, the report failed to provide sufficient context for the claims made; this is in breach of the accuracy standards outlined in section 3.2 of the Code.

The ABC also agrees that the report gave the misleading impression that Fosamax was listed on the PBS scheme by the Government in December 2006. As you point out this was not the case; the Government simply extended the eligibility criteria for patients. Further, the story incorrectly quoted The American Society For Bone and Mineral Research report *Bisphosphonate-Associated Osteonecrosis of the Jaw*. The ABC story stated that "... An international medical task force recently warned ONJ is rapidly evolving ...", whereas the report actually said: "the task force recognises that information on incidence of ONJ is rapidly evolving ...". These matters constitute a further two breaches of section 3.2 of the Code.

With regard to your concern that the report referred to you as a "chief advocate of the use of bisphosphonates", the program introduced you as follows: "Professor Philip Sambrook is one of Australia's leading osteoporosis experts and one of the chief advocates of the use of bisphosphonates to treat the condition." The on screen title stated: "Prof Philip Sambrook, University of Sydney". ABC

News has advised me that you identified yourself to the reporter as a Professor of Rheumatology at the University of Sydney, a former Medical Director of Osteoporosis Australia and current President of the Australian and New Zealand Bone and Mineral society. On review, the ABC does not believe that the manner in which you were introduced in the program was a misrepresentation. It is perhaps relevant to note that additional titles are often not used in television reports due to the need for brevity.

With regard to this statement in the report: "*Bruce Edwards is one of an estimated 500 Australians who in just four short years have developed osteonecrosis of the jaw or ONJ.*", we have confirmed that the figure of 500 was based on information from Professor Alistair Goss. As this figure was from a credible source, and presented as an estimate, we do not believe it constitutes a breach of our accuracy standards. However, it is pertinent to note that in view of our other findings, this figure should have been provided against the context of the different risk levels facing cancer patients and osteoporosis patients.

In reference to your concerns regarding the segment in the report which discusses alternative treatments for osteoporosis patients such as calcium and vitamin D supplements, we have reviewed your extended interview with reporter Nick Grimm. Although we do appreciate your concerns, on balance, we do not believe that you were misquoted or that your response was taken out of context in the final report.

I am advised by ABC News that your extended interview was not deliberately excluded from the *The 7.30 Report* website. Rather, I understand that interviews are posted on the website on an informal, ad hoc basis and the process for doing so is still in its infancy. It appears that because it was a particularly long interview, there may have been some technical issues associated with accessing the material quickly. The interview was subsequently posted on *The 7.30 Report* website following receipt of your letter. However, we acknowledge that it would have been preferable to have posted your extended interview earlier, to ensure a wider range of views were provided in the additional program materials.

On behalf of the ABC, I would like to apologise for the serious shortcomings in this report and I would like to assure you that these matters have been brought to the attention of ABC News management, and will be reported to the ABC Board.

As you are no doubt aware, a subsequent edition of *The 7.30 Report*, featuring yourself and Professor Chris Nordin on 21 December 2007 addressed many areas of concern you highlighted in the report of 12 December 2007. Importantly, the different level of risk facing cancer and osteoporosis patients was explained, the benefits of bisphosphonates were discussed and the role of supplements such as calcium were explained more fully. Additionally, a prominent Editor's Note will be appended to the website edition of the 11 December report, which will also highlight the link to program of 21 December.

Thank you again for bringing your concerns to the attention of the ABC.

Yours sincerely,



Denise Musto
Audience & Consumer Affairs