

## Sugar pills

Now and then, one of my family members divulges more about certain bodily topics — say, last night's indigestion or this morning's bunion — than my teenage niece can tolerate. When this happens, she draws her fingers across her mouth in the "zip it" motion popularized by Dr. Evil, then says, "Thanks for oversharing."

That's how I've been feeling about Debbie Reynolds ever since I saw her image beaming out from behind a stage curtain on the cover of a press kit for a drug that controls an "overactive bladder." And Bob Dole, since I saw him extolling the virtues of Viagra. Not to mention Kelsey Grammer and spouse, spokespeople for IBS (irritable bowel syndrome).

It used to be that celebrities and pharmaceuticals mentioned in the same sentence meant an arrest for possession of an illegal substance. Now it means "endorsement contract," and part of the contract often includes the broadcast of information I'd rather not ingest. But the oversharing of the rich and famous is harmless. Another, more subtle union of celebrity and pharmacology is more troubling.

Celebs long have been courted by nonprofit foundations devoted to the prevention and cure of diseases and other health-related issues, both to raise awareness and help bring in research funds. Often, the star has a personal connection to the condition, such as pro-football player and autism spokesman Doug Flutie, who has an autistic son, or musician B.B. King, who has diabetes and appears in TV spots reminding other diabetics to keep close tabs on their medications. Since actor Michael J. Fox was diagnosed with Parkinson's, he has trained a brighter spotlight on the disease than anyone before him.

But there's a big difference



Kristin Tillotson  
POP STAND

between public service and stumping for drug brands — a difference that's becoming harder to detect as more drug companies hire stars to be the "faces" of PR campaigns that are part public service, part product promotion.

Exhibit A: Rob Lowe, star of NBC's popular "The West Wing," recently signed a deal with Amgen Inc. to headline a public-relations campaign about febrile neutropenia — a condition that makes chemotherapy patients (including Lowe's father, now recovered) more prone to lingering, painful infections that alter their treatments.

Amgen, which in January received FDA approval for its neutropenia treatment Neulasta, is not buying commercial air time featuring the star — who has a very high "Q" factor, or recognition and popularity rating, with women aged 50 and older, a primary target market for Neulasta. Instead, he is the headliner for a public-relations campaign that Amgen hopes will include bookings on top-rated talk shows, according to Amy Doner Schachtel.

Schachtel, who arranged the deal, runs the New Jersey-based company Premier Entertainment Consulting, which specializes in matching stars to drug manufacturers. In 1995, while working for another PR firm, Schachtel was watching an episode of "L.A." in which Dr. Carter, played by Noah Wyle, was advising a melanoma patient. She signed Wyle to speak out about melanoma on "The Today Show" and "Entertainment Tonight" as well as in USA Today.

I have interviewed Lowe. I think he is one of the most likable, self-effacing, well-meaning guys on television. He has logged many hours speaking out about breast cancer, from which both his grandmother and great-grandmother died. And I have no reason to doubt that his primary motivation this time around is his father's painful experience.

Lowe is not taping commercials for Neulasta, and FDA regulations prevent him from mentioning the drug by name during talk-show appearances (unless he also goes into a full litany of side effects and gives out an 800 info number).

He's gorgeous, well-liked, has a personal connection to the problem addressed by Neulasta, and a reputation for humility and sincerity. A perfect spokesman.

But the fact remains that Amgen is paying Lowe for his time — likely close to \$1 million, according to a source in the Wall Street Journal. Whether he donates some or all of his fee to charity, an ethical sticking point remains: Viewers won't necessarily assume he's getting paid a bundle, as they would if he were featured in a commercial.

Another problem: the unintentional air of expertise celebrity endorsement lends, especially when there's a personal tie.

Schachtel stresses that medical advice-giving is the job of doctors and experts also assigned to the campaign, not the entertainers. But, like

any good promotions professional, she makes darn sure to find the most emotionally influential person for the job: "I counsel my clients to wait for the right celebrity," she said. "It takes eight months of research, that's what we do."

By the time they've logged their first 100 hours of television, most viewers are sophisticated enough to know a product pitch when they see one, no matter how artfully it's gilded. But it's hard not to feel one's heartstrings tugged when bicycle-racing champ Lance Armstrong dandles his infant on my TV screen, courtesy of Bristol Myers-Squibb, which sells a brand of cisplatin, the drug that cured Armstrong's testicular cancer in 1996, after which he went on to win the Tour de France, twice.

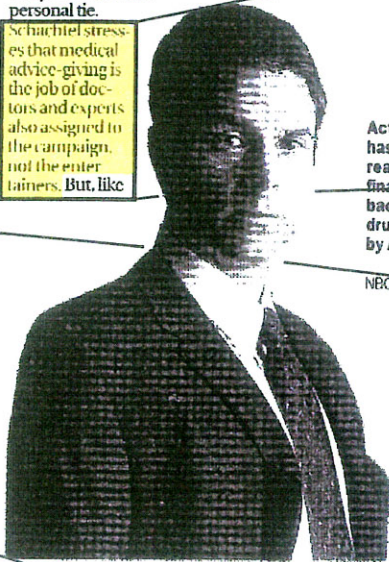
What you make for dinner tonight is a choice. Cancer is not.

Say you're an older woman with a weakening bladder (some of us had that problem in junior high, on the ski slopes, far from the amenities of the chalet. But perhaps I'm oversharing.) You have a choice of medication. And I hope you'll ask your doctor, not Debbie Reynolds.

— Kristin Tillotson is at ktillotson@startribune.com.

"I counsel my clients to wait for the right celebrity," she said, "If it takes eight months of research that's what we do."

Schachtel stresses that medical advice-giving is the job of doctors and experts also assigned to the campaign, not the entertainers.



Actor Rob Lowe has a personal reason (and a financial one) for backing a new drug treatment by Amgen.

NBC photo

Schachtel, who arranged the deal, runs the New Jersey-based company Premier Entertainment Consulting, which specializes in matching stars to drug manufacturers. In 1995, while working for another firm, Schachtel was watching an episode of "E.R." in which Dr. Carter, played by Noah Wyle, was advertising a melanoma patient. She signed Wyle to speak out about melanoma on "The Today Show" and "Entertainment Tonight" as well as in USA Today.