



**THE BLOG** 11/16/2009 05:12 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

# Bra Helps Fight Breast Cancer



By Marty Kaplan

Now that CNN has put Lou Dobbs out to pasture, you'd think that The Most Trusted Name in News would make the reporting of facts — you know, the practice formerly known as journalism — the hallmark of its brand. Dream on.

This past Saturday, morning hosts Betty Nguyen and TJ Holmes introduced a segment with CNN's tech guru Mario Armstrong this way: Betty: "There is a bra in fact that will soon be on the market, and the claim is that it can help women fight breast cancer." TJ: "We've got a lot of questions about this one. If it works, you know what, this is one of the greatest inventions ever."

This is what journalistic scrupulousness looks like these days. The anchors were implying, Even if our bosses suspect this story is a crock, they're making us do it anyway, because they think it'll stop you from changing the channel. As long as we cover our butts with words like "claim" and "if," CNN thinks it's perfectly kosher to give some quackery about preventing cancer, like some demagoguery about death panels, four minutes of airtime.

The "Bra helps fight breast cancer" segment turned out to be shameless product placement for Demron, a lightweight radiation shielding material patented by a Florida surgeon and manufactured by his company. The material protects its wearers, among them medical professionals and their patients, from X rays and other radiation. According to the story, if a woman with breast cancer is undergoing brachytherapy — in which radioactive seeds are implanted in her breast — then wearing a Demron-lined bra might protect her family and others she comes near from radiation that could be emitted by the pellets in her body.

Whether that's true or not, it's not how the CNN segment was teased. That disparity may be why TJ said to Mario, puzzled, "A lot of women will be listening to this and think, ok, I go get this bra, then that can cut my chances of breast cancer." It may be why Betty interrupted Mario, asking him to "explain to me very clearly, how does it reduce the risk of breast cancer for those who maybe don't have it."

Mario's wan answer: "Yeah, well, see, I think that's still what needs to be worked out, they don't have a defined answer for that just yet."

By the end of the segment, it turns out that the women who could, maybe, hypothetically be helped by this bra are women who "have known risks in the family for breast cancer." Why this bra might help them — will shielding them from sources of everyday background radiation, like microwaves and color TVs, really prevent their breast cancer genes from being expressed? — Mario doesn't say. He does say, "A lot of testing still needs to be done, but they got the go ahead to move forward.... But we're talking about high-risk situations... If you were to wear this bra, it may — hasn't been proven — but it may be able to help."

"Interesting," says Betty. "This is interesting stuff," echoes TJ. I wish by "interesting" they were dog-whistling to Mario, "You gullible shill." I wish by "interesting" they meant their segment producer and writer to hear, "You reckless hope-mongers." I wish by "interesting" they were signaling to CNN's audience, "We apologize for the insulting, unforgivable way this network just jerked you and your loved ones around by exploiting a life-or-death topic as an excuse for corporate cheerleading."

CNN is far from the only offender. As the independent nonprofit HealthNewsReview.org documents on its website, the morning health news segments on ABC, CBS and NBC regularly and "unquestioningly promote new drugs and new technologies [and] feed the 'worried well' by raising unrealistic expectations of unproven technologies that may produce more harm than good."

On the day before CNN's cancer-preventing bra story ran, University of Minnesota professor Gary Schwitzer, the publisher of Health News Review, told Bob Garfield, host of NPR's On the Media, that a lot of these network TV health stories aren't just bad journalism; they're actually dangerous, malicious, sickening. Garfield asked him if there's any evidence that this kind of coverage — "this dreck" — causes real harm. Yes, he said, reports show very clearly the impact of health news coverage, both good and bad, on consumers of that information.

"What you have described for me is a disgrace," Garfield told him. "I believe it is," Schwitzer agreed. "I believe that we have given over the airwaves to these [media] companies that are abusing that privilege and misinforming the public — inaccurately, in an imbalanced way and incompletely. Yeah, that's how you would define the disgrace."

Health News Review recently announced that after three-and-a-half years, they're not going to review TV health news segments anymore. No matter how bad some of the stories are, the networks just don't care.

Coming up after the break: Tightly-whities help fight prostate cancer. Now this.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*

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