



Our role in moulding the image of cancer

→ Kathy Redmond ■ EDITOR

Breaking the taboo on cancer and bringing discussion of the disease and the stories of cancer patients into the public arena has to rank as one of the big achievements clocked up since Nixon declared a war on cancer in the early 1970s. Eleven years ago, the live broadcast of American TV presenter Katie Couric undergoing a colonoscopy showed how far society and the media had moved, and was a good example of the inventive use of media to promote awareness about prevention and early detection that could help save lives. Stories tracking our growing understanding of what cancer is and how best to treat it are gradually succeeding in supplanting traditional responses of panic and fear with a more rational approach that helps patients play an active role in their treatment. Human stories about how cancer affects the lives of patients and their families have helped break the social isolation of those living with cancer and confront discrimination.

That's the good news. The bad news is that, with the best will in the world, cancer can be a difficult subject to cover well – the mass media is not at its best when dealing with stories involving many uncertainties, and it often struggles to get across complex pictures of risk and risk management. So though the quantity of coverage has improved, especially with the proliferation of online information, there is a big question about quality. A study by researchers at North Carolina State University has shown that many online news stories about cancer may actually add to readers' confusion.

A recent opinion piece in the *New York*

Times has highlighted another unsettling trend in the way breast cancer, in particular, is being 'marketed' by campaigns – be they advocacy groups or corporations doing their bit for the cause. Messages are often dominated by images of young women, with a highly sexualised focus on their breasts, and 'sassy' upbeat messages that may be designed to promote self-examination, but fail to get a serious message across to the right people. Somewhere along the line, the reality of breast cancer, which affects primarily older women, and presents real challenges in terms of body image, not to mention the possibility of dying of the disease, has got lost.

In fact, far from helping, these campaigns are probably undermining the cause they claim to support.

It is impossible to control the way that cancer is presented to the public; however, it is possible to challenge irresponsible campaigning and journalism, and to promote critical and helpful media coverage. One way ESO has sought to do this is through our Best Cancer Reporter Award, which has now added a new prize, specifically for campaigning journalism, which this year was awarded to a Romanian television journalist for a campaign to set up a stem cell donor registry (see *Desperately seeking a bone marrow match*, p34).

You too can play a role by nominating journalists for the 2011 Award. Further information about the Award and nomination process can be found by clicking on the media tab at www.cancerworld.org.