

ETHICS -- PR firms help doctors get exposure

MEGAN SCOTT - The Associated Press

Forget the full-page ads and the free seminars at the senior center.

Doctors and other medical professionals are increasingly hiring PR firms to land them interviews with local and national media - exposure, they say, that is more cost-effective than spending money on yellow page ads, mailings, and fancy signs on the public bus.

But ethicists say the practice raises questions about whether doctors should use paid PR representatives to increase their visibility instead of letting a reputation for good care by itself do the talking. Further, regardless of a doctor's ability, those who can afford a PR firm could gain an advantage over those who can't. "Money is a gateway to access," says James Weber, director of the Beard Center for Leadership in Ethics at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pa. "I'd like to think that reputation can also be access to opportunity."

While the American Medical Association doesn't track the trend, public relations firms say they're seeing more business from medical professionals. **For example, Katherine Rothman, President of KMR Communications, says her health care public relations firm has tripled its client list to 45 in eight years. "Doctors know if they get out in the media, they can be in front of a few hundred thousand people instead of, let me go lecture and speak in front of 40 women," says Rothman. "It's no longer a case of, if I build it, they will come."**

PR FOR DOCTORS

Of course, reporters often need to interview doctors - for insight about a disease, a new medicine, or medical procedure - and when a doctor writes a book it's understood that he or she, like any author, will have a publicist or PR specialist to help promote it.

But cosmetic dentists, cosmetic surgeons and dermatologists are increasingly hiring PR firms in an effort to stand out as more young doctors enter the lucrative field of aesthetic medicine.

"In New York City, picture Park Avenue, Madison Avenue, that's like the Gold Coast for plastic surgery," says Rothman. "You have all of these plastic surgeons practicing within 30 blocks of each other. They all want that patient who is going to come in and spend top dollar for a face lift."

Dr. Joseph Cervone of Concierge Skin Care in West Orange, N.J., hired KMR a couple of months ago to tout his minimally invasive cosmetic procedures. Prior, he was depending on direct mailing and a coupon in the Valpak mailer. "There is a great deal of competition for this particular niche," he says. "I think hiring a PR firm was the right thing to do. It gives us a leg up on other practices trying to do direct marketing."

Even the Illinois Chapter of the American College of Midwives hired a PR firm earlier this year. The chapter is working to change the perception that midwives provide a service that's old fashioned or inferior to other options.

"How do you break through the notion that only physicians give medical care?" asks Barbara Havens, chair of the chapter. "In Illinois, we felt invisible. We want to get the word out so we become as legitimate as a health care provider as a physician would be."

THE ETHICS

But what about the ethics of this? It's cheaper than a full page ad in New York magazine, but doctors who can't afford a PR firm's fees don't get the potential boost in exposure.

Some prospective patients also might assume that a doctor quoted in a national magazine is a better doctor. While journalists typically choose to interview doctors based on their level of expertise, one doctor could gain an exposure advantage over an equally qualified competitor by paying a specialist to help get his or her name in print.

There was a time when doctors didn't seek publicity because it was not about how many patients a doctor could treat but more about acting in the patients' best interests, says Dr. David Donnersberger, also an attorney, who works at Evanston Hospital in Illinois.

He touts traditional advertising - volunteering, free seminars, ads in the phone book. Hiring a PR firm, he says, is not an "effective business model."

"It seems like a gargantuan nuclear type solution to a problem that physicians and other professions have been able to deal with for a long time within the usual boundaries of our professional ethics," he says.