

# Catalyst challenges the mainstream

But now to trouble closer to home, at our ABC, where the popular science program Catalyst has come under attack.

In its recent two-part documentary, *The Heart of the Matter*, which pulled in a huge audience of almost 1.5 million people per episode, reporter Maryanne Demasi suggested that high cholesterol does NOT cause heart disease and most people are wasting their time taking cholesterol-reducing drugs called statins.

She also suggested we've been conned by pharmaceutical companies so they can make billions of dollars in profits.

After the first episode went to air on 24th October there was a storm of outrage from medical experts.

The National Heart Foundation of Australia declared that it was :

... shocked by the disregard for the extensive evidence ...

— National Heart Foundation, Media Release, 28th October, 2013

And added

High cholesterol remains a risk factor for heart disease, the number one killer of Australians.

— National Heart Foundation, Media Release, 28th October, 2013

Professor Emily Banks, Chair of the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Medicines, was also highly critical and demanded the second episode not be shown ...

Professor urges ABC to pull Catalyst episode on cholesterol drugs, says it could result in deaths.

— ABC News Online, 29th October, 2013

Then, after the second episode went ahead, the ABC's Health expert Dr Norman Swan also came out firing, saying Catalyst's program would kill people ... because it would make them stop taking their medicines.

Now, Media Watch is not going to take sides in this scientific debate.

But looking at the journalism we're almost as shocked as the doctors.

Both episodes of Catalyst struck us as sensationalist and grossly unbalanced; and some of their so-called 'experts' had questionable qualifications.

But look for yourself. Here's how episode one of *Heart of the Matter* began.

Reporter, Dr Maryanne Demasi: For the last four decades, dietary fat and cholesterol have been the villains in heart disease.

Dr Michael Eades: You very seldom see the words 'saturated fat' in the public press when they're not associated with artery clogging. So it's like it's all one term - 'artery clogging saturated fats'.

Reporter, Dr Maryanne Demasi: But now some medical experts are coming forward to challenge this medical paradigm.

Dr Jonny Bowden: I think it's a huge misconception that saturated fat and cholesterol are the demons in the diet, and it is 100% wrong.

Dr Stephen Sinatra: Saturated fat has been vilified for years because of the cholesterol theory.

Reporter, Dr Maryanne Demasi: A multibillion dollar food industry has fuelled our phobia of fat and cholesterol and dramatically influenced our diet.

Dr Michael Eades: That's not science. That's marketing.

Dr Jonny Bowden: It's lived past its expiration date, and it's one of these hypotheses that just won't die.

Reporter, Dr Maryanne Demasi: Have we all been conned? In this episode, I'll follow the road which led us to believe that saturated fat and cholesterol cause heart disease, and reveal why it's being touted as the biggest myth in medical history.

— ABC1, Catalyst, The Heart of the Matter, 24th October, 2013

Powerful stuff is it not? Conned; 100% wrong; villains; demons; vilified, phobia, the biggest myth in medical history.

If you make claims like that on an ABC Science program you'd want be sure they're pretty well-sourced, especially when they contradict the vast weight of mainstream medical opinion.

So who are these three 'experts' that Dr Maryanne Demasi so relied on?

Well, Dr Jonny Bowden and Dr Stephen Sinatra are co-authors of this popular American potboiler.

The Great Cholesterol Myth-why lowering your cholesterol won't prevent heart disease and the statin-free plan that will

— The Great Cholesterol Myth, Jonny Bowden and Stephen Sinatra

The foreword to this book was written by the other "expert" we saw in the opening clip, Dr Michael Eades.

Three men with one mind, presented as three independent points of view.

And what exactly is their expertise?

Well, 'Doctor' Jonny Bowden isn't a medical doctor at all even though Catalyst claimed he is.

And he also has a conflict of interest.

The self-styled 'Rogue Nutritionist' who has written 14 books on healing, weight loss and longevity, sells

heart health pills, which compete with statins, he also sell pills for brain power and anti-aging.

And while he does have a PhD it's not from a recognised university.

It's a Clayton's PhD obtained by correspondence from the Clayton College of Natural Health in Alabama, which offered degrees in naturopathy, holistic nutrition, herbal studies and iridology before it went out of business in 2010.

Damned by one critic at the time as

The biggest quack school in natural medicine ...

— The Huffington Post, 12th July, 2010

Yet Clayton's Dr Bowden was relied on by Catalyst's Maryanne Demasi for claims like this:

Dr Jonny Bowden: When you look at the data, it's very clear - everything that we have been told about saturated fat and cholesterol is a bold-faced lie. It's just not so.

— ABC1, Catalyst, The Heart of the Matter, 24th October, 2013

Dr Michael Eades, who wrote the foreword to Bowden's book IS a medical doctor.

But he's not a cardiologist or world expert, and his views are somewhat on the fringe.

His best-selling book Protein Power promotes an Atkins-style diet that ticks fatty foods like butter, eggs and cheese.

Eades also sells dietary supplements and heart health drugs.

... and hot water cookers.

Dr Michael Eades: Hi, I'm Dr Mike Eades.

Dr Mary Dan Eades: And I'm Dr Mary Dan Eades.

Dr Michael Eades: For almost three decades now we've been physicians practising in the health and nutrition field. We've operated clinics all over the country; we've written numerous best-selling books and we've been involved in the research and development of numerous health and fitness products. In fact, I guess you could say that health and fitness are our passion.

Dr Mary Dan Eades: Well, that ... and cooking.

— YouTube, SousVide Supreme Introduction, 9th December, 2009

The other expert in Catalyst's opening pitch, Dr Stephen Sinatra, IS a cardiologist.

He too has a website selling cholesterol pills that compete with statins.

And while Bowden's co-author has published peer-reviewed research on heart disease he seems to be more interested in a treatment called Grounding.

Dr Stephen Sinatra: You look at grounding for example or earthing, you know, putting your bare feet on the ground, you'll soak up lots of electrons because the earth is negatively charged, our bodies are so full of free radicals, from, you know, anything from heavy metals to air pollution, to trans fats, I mean, our body is being inundated with a firestorm of free radicals so you got to put the fire out ...So I am so bullish on grounding as the most primitive, easiest, cheapest way of creating optimum health.

— YouTube, Dr Stephen Sinatra, 20th April, 2010

So why on earth did Catalyst end up relying on people like this to take on the world's medical establishment and rubbish the views of heart experts around the world?

And why did Maryanne Demasi fly all the way to America to interview them?

Especially since she claims on Catalyst's website:

Over the last 2 to 3 years, I have interviewed at least a hundred experts and patients worldwide about their views on diet, heart disease and medications to lower cholesterol.

— ABC, Catalyst Website, 24th October, 2013

So how did she end up with so many views outside the mainstream? With the sort of advocates you'd expect to find on A Current Affair or Today Tonight, instead of on the ABC?

But it's not only the type of expert Catalyst relied on that is a problem.

It's also that the prosecution was given so much more time to make its case.

In the two episodes of Heart of the Matter eight witnesses were called to say that cholesterol does not cause heart disease or that statins do not save lives.

And they were given nearly 27 minutes.

The defence was allowed to call just two witnesses who got just 4 and a half minutes between them.

The rest of the hour was given to reporter Dr Maryanne Demasi. And it's not hard to see whose side she was on.

She obviously agreed with Stephen Sinatra, nodded enthusiastically at Ernest Curtis and liked Jonny Bowden.

But she was stony faced when she listened to Professor Sullivan who undoubtedly IS a world expert in the field ... and who was appalled by what she eventually broadcast.

In my opinion, both episodes of the two-part Catalyst program were unscientific, confusing and irresponsibly misleading.

— Clinical Associate Professor David Sullivan, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Response to Media Watch questions, 8th November, 2013

In a scorching three page email to Media Watch, which you'll find on our website, Professor Sullivan accused Maryanne Demasi and Catalyst of:

Overwhelming bias

Intransigence

Serious misconceptions

Incorrect assumptions

— Clinical Associate Professor David Sullivan, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Response to Media Watch questions, 8th November, 2013

And much much more.

Professor Sullivan also told us:

... the answers I provided during more than 2 hours of interview were largely ignored and omitted.

— Clinical Associate Professor David Sullivan, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Response to Media Watch questions, 8th November, 2013

Catalyst has confirmed that Professor Sullivan was only interviewed by Dr Demasi because the ABC TV's Editorial Policy Unit reviewed the program and advised it was so one-sided it needed to offer a balancing point of view.

This kind of echoes what the US science writer Gary Taubes told Demasi in the Heart of the Matter when he laid into the medical establishment by saying:

What you do in bad science is you ignore any evidence that's contrary to your beliefs, your hypothesis, and you only focus on the evidence that supports it.

— ABC1, Catalyst, The Heart of the Matter, 24th October, 2013

I'm afraid to say that's what you do in bad journalism too.

And that's what these two episodes of Catalyst appear to be.

And that's a shame because the causes and treatment of heart disease are an important subject for debate.

Thousands of lives and billions of dollars are at stake; and the ABC should be free to challenge established medical wisdom.

But it needs to do it much much better than this.

In the program's defence the team at Catalyst stood by its choice of experts and told us:

Our intention was to explore a provocative thesis. Inevitably a larger percentage of each 30 minute programme was taken explaining that thesis.

... Discussing and raising the profile of a non-mainstream view like this will inevitably raise objections, but we believe we did so in a responsible way that complied with the ABC's Editorial Policies.

— Catalyst Team, Response to Media Watch questions, 8th November, 2013

Sadly, we do not agree.

But decide for yourself. You can read their full response on our website and more material from both our stories, including [a nine-page critique](#) of the Catalyst program from the National Heart Foundation.

But for now that's all we have time for.

Goodbye.

\*\*\*Update: The ABCs Audience and Consumer Affairs Unit has ruled that Catalyst's episode on heart disease breached the ABCs standards on impartiality.

[An ABC investigation](#) has found the episode unduly favoured the argument against statins.

The program will be removed from the ABC website and new information has been added to the [ABC corrections page](#).

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