ABC Media Watch Heart Foundation Response to ABC Catalyst program 8 November 2013 Questions from Amy Donaldson

1. What was your overall impression of the two-part Catalyst program?

The Heart Foundation was deeply concerned with misleading reporting in the program and the conclusions presented by the ABC. We are fearful that it may be putting lives at risk.

The information presented was often opinion and experience based, rather than evidence based, which we would expect from a leading science program.

We were also concerned that the program was largely set in the context of the USA, not Australia. This is important as we have different food processing techniques and regulations that govern the pharmaceutical industry. We were disappointed in the calibre of the US spokespeople. Many of the US-spokespeople have not been published in the peer reviewed medical and scientific literature, [edited for legal reasons].

For example:

- Part 1 The program claimed margarines are full of harmful trans fats. Margarine is often pointed to as containing trans fats, however consumers can be assured that our food processing is different to that currently used in the US. For example Australian margarines with the Heart Foundation Tick contain a maximum of 1% trans fat (and most contain only 0.1 or 0.2% trans fat). The Heart Foundation, through the Tick Program, led the way in removing trans fat from margarines in Australia in the 90s and Australian margarines now have some of the lowest levels of trans fats in the world and significantly less trans fat than butter. The Heart Foundation has information on trans fats available on our website: http://www.heartfoundation.org.au/healthy-eating/fats/Pages/trans-fats.aspx
- Part 2 Direct consumer advertising was used in the visuals
 Commercial advertising of prescription only drugs is not permitted in Australia.

The program seemed to confuse the important issues – particularly around statin use in low risk patients and statin use in those with established coronary heart disease. Further, many of the opinions provided by US spokespeople were not challenged in the program, which resulted in an unbalanced reporting of the evidence.

2. Do you believe the two programs presented a balanced view of the debate surrounding cholesterol and statins? If not, why not?

No, the Heart Foundation was shocked by the imbalance of reporting and the disregard for the extensive evidence upon which the Heart Foundation's recommendations are made.

Overall, the show dismissed the vast body of evidence that exists to support the link between saturated fat, cholesterol and heart disease and the role of statins. This evidence is supported by a large number of national and international organisations.

A glaring omission was that there was no acknowledgement of the role that the Australian Government plays in the approval process of the national guidelines for nutrition and pharmaceuticals. For example, the NHMRC, PBAC and TGA all have clear guidelines relating to the consumption of dietary fats and the approval of pharmaceutical use in Australia.

National Vascular Disease Prevention Alliance. Guidelines for the assessment of Absolute cardiovascular disease risk (2009).

- http://www.heartfoundation.org.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/guidelines-Absolute-risk.pdf
- http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines/publications/cp114

The weight of the spokespeople was heavily slanted to the US. For example in part 1 there was commentary from the Heart Foundation and Prof David Sullivan, with five spokespeople from the US. The situation was similar in part 2.

The Heart Foundation believes critical information was missing in the debate. We believe the program glossed over the fact that statins are proven to be life saving as part of a treatment plan for people who have heart disease or have had a heart attack or stroke.

This was deeply concerning, particularly since the Heart Foundation has been made aware that there are people who have already had a heart attack and have stopped taking their statins as a result of the program.

3. When were you first contacted by Catalyst? What advice did you provide the program, and when did you provide it?

History

- ABC Catalyst first contacted the Heart Foundation on 3 May.
- A phone conversation 'for background info' was arranged with Heart Foundation's National Director of Cardiovascular Health Dr Rob Grenfell which lasted around 30 minutes. Dr Grenfell provided a range of suggested names of Australian experts that would be the best person for each topic.
- ABC called the Heart Foundation again on 22 May to request an on camera interview with Rob Grenfell.
- ABC Catalyst was directed to the evidence reviews, guidelines, position statements available on the Heart Foundation website and the NVDPA's Absolute Risk Guidelines
 - Links... http://www.heartfoundation.org.au/information-statement.aspx
 http://www.heartfoundation.org.au/information-statement.aspx
 http://www.heartfoundation.org.au/information-for-professionals/Clinical-Information/Pages/absolute-risk.aspx
- Dr Grenfell was interviewed on Wednesday 29th May. The interview lasted 1 hour, with the presence of Emma Bourke from the media team and two other clinical Heart Foundation staff.
- On 21 August Journalist Maryanne approached the Heart Foundation media team to clarify information about the strength of evidence linking saturated fat, cholesterol and heart disease. A detailed response of the evidence was prepared and emailed back to the ABC on 23 August. Note: we are prepared to provide this if helpful.
- On 26 Sep Maryanne contacted the Heart Foundation and indicated that she had asked Prof David Sullivan to review her script. She said he made about 70 comments on the script. After reviewing all the comments from Prof Sullivan - Maryanne said she realised she needed more balance of the story then asked the Heart Foundation who was the leading expert in the field. The Heart Foundation said that David was the best Australian expert on lipids – however Maryanne has indicated that he was in Hong Kong on business – and they would need to interview someone sooner.
- Maryanne had indicated that waiting for David to return would make the editing tight and that she was not able to delay the program as it would be a 'disaster for the network'. The Heart Foundation directed her to the experts on the Heart Foundation's "Summary of evidence. Dietary fats and dietary cholesterol for cardiovascular health (2009)" expert working group to find another Australian experts. She indicated that she had already interviewed Prof Peter Clifton (she said he was too technical to film on camera). She then got in touch with Prof Paul Nestel who did not want to be interviewed. The Heart Foundation then reiterated that Prof Sullivan was the best person suggest she would be best to wait for his return.

- Maryanne also clarified a few extra points in Sep/Oct about certain studies. After emails between Maryanne and Emma Bourke – Dr Grenfell spoke to Maryanne again over the phone on 3 October to clarify further points. On this occasion Dr Grenfell also stressed the impact the program could have on high risk patients coming off their statins.
- David Sullivan was interviewed early October (Maryanne had told us it was booked for the 9th Oct) – as he was in Hong Kong on business.
- On 23 Sep Maryanne indicated she had finalised episode one. Maryanne provided her "letter to the Heart Foundation/written commentary" of what points she did not agree with the Heart Foundation on.
- Maryanne then indicated that she wanted the Heart Foundation to respond to her letter which she wanted to submit to ABC legals.
- The CEO Lyn Roberts instructed Emma Bourke not to respond to their request, as the Heart Foundation was not prepared to sign off on her program.
- On 27 Sep Emma Bourke explained to Maryanne that we would not be able respond
 and the Heart Foundation did not believe it was our role to sign off on the direction of
 the program, as our response would also need to be passed via our legal team.
 Emma Bourke then sent an acknowledgement of receipt of her feedback
- The story was due to air on 17 October.
- On 17 October the Heart Foundation checked to see if the program was scheduled to air, and Maryanne confirmed it had been delayed a week as she did not meet deadline after having to wait for David Sullivan to return from overseas.
- The program aired on 24 and 31 October
- At no stage did Maryanne present any of the evidence to review or provide scripts to the Heart Foundation to consider.

4. Do you believe the topic was a legitimate one for Catalyst to examine? If so, why?

The area of saturated fat, cholesterol and heart disease always elicits discussion with many view points. The Heart Foundation for many years has provided information to help consumers and health professionals understand the best available evidence.

The Heart Foundation was willing to be interviewed on the topic, as there is scientific consensus around the evidence of saturated fat, cholesterol and heart disease and the role of statins.

We believed it was an opportunity to present the need for an absolute risk assessment to assess a person's risk of heart disease.

Given that previously the ABC Catalyst program has had a reputation for communicating and translating complex science for its audience, in this context the Heart Foundation agreed to be part of the program. We are however, extremely disappointed with the outcome.

5. In part one the reporter says the following:

Dr Maryanne Demasi

An extensive review of the literature showed that the data was highly inconsistent. In fact, there were many long-term studies that refute the idea that saturated fat raises cholesterol. So I approached the National Heart Foundation for further evidence. They said the data was complex. They cited one study which showed only certain types of saturated fat could raise bad cholesterol, but it also raised good cholesterol. In the end they concluded - 'We agree that we are limited by the evidence base, available at this time.'

This response from the Heart Foundation seems quite flimsy considering the Foundation's strong stance on saturated fat. Is this an accurate reflection of the Heart Foundation's response to Catalyst?

No, the Heart Foundation doesn't feel it is an accurate reflection of the response we provided Catalyst.

The implication that we cited one study is not an accurate reflection for two reasons:

- 1. The link provided was to a meta-analysis of 60 controlled trials (refer to meta-analysis by Mensink et al (2003) http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12716665). A meta-analysis is a summary of the available literature and involves data analysis of the data from all the studies, not just one. A meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials is also the highest level of evidence according to the NHMRC assessment and grading process. The accurate thing to say would've been that we cited "one meta-analysis of 60 controlled trials that concluded "the effects of fats on these risk markers should not in themselves be considered to reflect changes in risk but should be confirmed by prospective observational studies or clinical trails. By that standard, risk is reduced most effectively when trans fatty acids and saturated fatty acids are replaced with cis-unsaturated fatty acids"."
 - a. For that reason, we also provided Maryanne the most recent metaanalyses and pooled analyses of prospective cohorts and randomised controlled trials to confirm the above mentioned study, as evidenced in the attached.
- We also directed Maryanne to the World Health Organisation summary of the available evidence, as evidenced below. (refer World Health Organisation's review of Fatty acids http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i1953e/i1953e00.pdf)

Lastly, we believe the excerpt 'We agree that we are limited by the evidence base, available at this time.' was taken out of context, as evidenced in the attached. This sentence was provided in identifying the supporting views of a recent paper by US experts (none of whom featured on the Catalyst program) about the complexities involved. It would have been more accurate to include the first sentence with the rest of the paragraph, as included below.

(Note: We agree that we are limited by the evidence base available at this time. At a relatively recent Fatty Acid symposium http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22658146 the following comments were made by respected nutritional epidemiologists:

- "Although randomized controlled trails with clinical end points would be ideal to answer all, or even one, of the question, such trials are difficult to conduct and often are not feasible. The best-available evidence will likely come from a combination of controlled feeding studies with intermediate end points such as blood lipids, blood pressure, inflammation, and platelet aggregation, in combination with large prospective, observational studies in which investigators examine the relationship between intakes and clinical outcomes" (p218)
- "A limited number of intervention studies have examined dietary SFA intake and CHD outcomes. It is prohibitively expensive to carry out such studies, and it is unlikely we will see new ones in the future. Hence, it is important to carefully consider the historical data while acknowledging that some of the methodology is not consistent with current standards." (p220))

Note: we are happy to provide the full email response to Maryanne if that is helpful.

6. The background and commercial interests of several of the talent in the two Catalyst programs has been written about on the internet following broadcast. It has been pointed out that some of the interviewees have financial interests in supplements and books. What has also been pointed out is that Professor David Sullivan receives substantial research funding from the Heart Foundation. Does the Heart Foundation believe this conflict should have been disclosed? If not, why not?

The Heart Foundation has supported cardiovascular research since 1958 contributing \$370m to the field, which means many cardiovascular researchers in Australia will have received Heart Foundation funding at some stage of their career.

It is inappropriate to compare book and product sales, with the publications from a peer reviewed scientific researcher who has been awarded research grants through the Heart Foundation research funding program. This peer reviewed funding process undertaken by the Heart Foundation aligns with the NHMRC – via a rigorous peer review process and assessment on scientific merit.

The Heart Foundation also has clear principles and processes in place to help manage conflicts of interest. It is common practice in Australia for all researchers to outline the sources of their funding for their research and each year the Heart Foundation lists is successful research grant recipients on its website.

David Sullivan is one of Australia's most distinguished experts in the field of lipids and cholesterol. It is disappointing that more Australian experts were not used. Australia has many noted experts in food science, nutrition, lipidology, cardiology and epidemiology.



A question specifically for Dr Robert Grenfell:

Were you satisfied with the way in which your comments were presented in the programs? If not, why not? No I was not satisfied in the way the comments were presented.

For example I said on camera: I would agree that there are people in Australia today who are being treated for cholesterol where their cardiovascular risk is not high. And you have to question whether they should in fact actually be on that.

What was not aired, was my following statement which said:

"However, what we also know is that is a large group of people who are at high risk of a heart attack are not being treated and should be on a statin."

Note: the Heart Foundation stands by the comments and accuracy of Dr Grenfell's comments.

Many thanks for considering these questions and apologies for the number of them. If you have anything else you would like to add, please feel free to do so.

 Clarification that ABC Catalyst Maryanne Demasi claiming she presented Heart Foundation with the data and the Heart Foundation supported the evidence. Comment from Maryanne's interview on ABC PM "But when we actually presented the scientific literature to them then, they were certainly supportive of it."



Dr Lyn Roberts was quoted on ABC PM program in response to this. See... ABC PM http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-11-02/heart-foundation-shocked-at-abc-decision-to-runcatalyst-report/5065298

"The reporter who put the program together for Catalyst, Dr Maryanne Demasi, yesterday said she had presented the scientific literature on the issues to the National Heart Foundation and they were "certainly supportive of it".

But Dr Roberts says that is not true.

"I mean she hasn't presented the scientific literature to me as the national CEO in terms of that," she said."

To confirm at no stage did Maryanne present evidence to the Heart Foundation for review.

2. [edited for legal reasons].

3. Relevant media coverage – highlighting the views of the medical and scientific community:

Media coverage:

News Corp Normal Swan - http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/health/abc-health-guru-dr-norman-swan-accuses-tv-science-program-catalyst-of-killing-people/story-fneuz9ev-1226753839228

ABC PM

- ABC Radio PM: ABC Radio National: Interview with Catalyst host Maryanne Demasi
- Peter Clifton interview http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/healthreport/the-cholesterol-and-statin-debate/5067536
- Lyn Roberts http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-11-02/heart-foundation-shocked-at-abc-decision-to-run-catalyst-report/5065298

774 ABC Melbourne: Interview with Lyn Roberts Red Symons Breakfast

Opinion piece – Prof Peter Clifton http://www.theage.com.au/comment/odds-of-surviving-are-better-with-statins-20131106-2x0r1.html

ABC health

- http://www.abc.net.au/health/features/stories/2013/11/04/3883432.htm
- http://www.abc.net.au/health/library/stories/2013/11/01/3881358.htm

The Australian - http://www.theaustralian.com.au/media/abc-facing-new-questions-over-controversial-episode-of-science-program-catalyst/story-e6frg996-1226754383962

SMH - http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/abc-report-could-cause-death-says-abc-health-specialist-20131104-2wx3n.html

Dr Ginnni - http://www.4bc.com.au/blogs/2013-4bc-health-wellbeing-blog/cholesterollowering-statins/20131103-2wusb.html#.UnucxqXwc_c

[edited for legal reasons].

The Conversation

- http://theconversation.com/viewing-catalysts-cholesterol-programs-through-the-sceptometer-19817
- http://theconversation.com/some-things-you-should-know-about-statins-and-heart-disease-19655
- http://theconversation.com/worried-about-taking-statins-heres-what-you-need-to-know-19877

The West Australian

- http://health.thewest.com.au/news/1066/patients-swamp-gps-in-anticholesterol-pill-confusion
- http://health.thewest.com.au/news/1067/cholesterol-con-or-cure

<u>Crikey</u>: Some things you should know about statins and heart disease (attached)

2GB – Leon Simons http://www.2gb.com/article/cholestrol-fats-statin-drugs-and-heart-risks

Courier Mail in Brisbane ran an opinion piece on Catalyst by Terry Sweetman http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/opinion/good-viewing-but-no-catalyst-for-forgetting-cholesterol-medication/story-fnihsr9v-1226755295166

Links to other organisations

- http://www.georgeinstitute.org.au/news/leading-heart-experts-rally-together-to-stop-our-nations-biggest-killer
- RACGP
- NPS Medicine Wise
- Baker IDI
- Consumer Health Forum
- Pharmacy Guild of Australia
- 4. [edited for legal reasons].