

Careless whispers

Crystal Mytee

I couldn't believe it, what on earth was that doing there? Who in their right mind sticks a machine packed with high-calorie snacks in a hospital clinic waiting room, a hospital which, only weeks earlier, had run 'Healthy Living' seminars for its staff with the slogan 'Let's set a good example'.

I'm used to opening the door of my consultation room at the GUM clinic and being faced with fidgety patients reading magazines and texting, but staring back at me from now on would be a confectionary dispensing machine.

A quick audit for my next appraisal confirmed that this machine had already served all bar one of the waiting patients, thereby speeding their journey to obesity-related erectile dysfunction and infertility. This machine, and its position, was going to be a problem for me. Clearly it was favourite to outdo me in the patient satisfaction stakes. But the real issue was, I like this kind of snack and have learned the hard way how it can pile on the pounds. For me to resist it really has to be 'out of sight, out of mind'. I could feel my hand subconsciously reaching into my empty pocket for change. This was going to be hard because each time I open the door the first thing I'll see is this bloody machine offering me instant gratification – something that the current patients in the waiting room had already received from it. In fact, instant gratification was probably why they were here at the clinic anyway.

What a hypocritical move by the NHS Trust. Surely if you're going to try and make a few quid from a vending machine, at least pack it with healthy food. Of course, in reality that's not going to work, is it? The drive to make people feel more at home and pander to their needs continues and this is the next step in a long line of 'convenience for the consumer' measures. But the message this gives patients contradicts the healthy eating advice and is simply going to create more work for an over-burdened NHS.

However, I'm reminded of my student days when during a teaching ward round a Professor of Medicine said: "Why should we advise people to stop smoking and boozing? Do we want to be out of a job?" So is this the secondary gain for the NHS Trust? In the short term a quick buck; in the longer

term a steady income from obesity-related health problems. You have to admire the strategy.

Putting my cynical cap to one side, what if this is simply a genuine attempt to help relax patients at a time that can be stressful? But we all know how a relaxed mood promotes sex, and bearing in mind the dispensing machine contains certain well-known brands associated with advertising of a sexual nature, ("only the crumbliest, flakiest chocolate" starts drifting through my head) might we be adding to our clinic's problem of being overrun.

Well, yes, we could be doing just that, because to my amazement the stand filled with highly informative leaflets about STIs was gone, replaced with a modern-look size zero display stand, home to a variety of gossip magazines. Many of these promised the reader better sex, and more often than not case studies proudly proclaiming they enjoyed the activity more than ten times a day. Good heavens, someone who bonks more than our local students, I didn't think that was possible.

So our hospital Trust in its infinite wisdom is providing a mood for sex, and educating people how to have sex (in over 1001 ways according to one magazine); surely it won't be long before positioned alongside these new additions in the waiting room is a cigarette dispenser.

If at the end of the day the goal is to make money out of patients then let's do it in a way that educates them at the same time. I'd like to replace all the confectionary in this machine with STI treatments and emergency contraception. Think of the fun you could have telling someone they need to select treatment number 44 for their NSU, maybe number 69 for their HSV Type 1 genital herpes, and any number for emergency contraception so long as it's 72 or less. At least this way they would learn that STIs cost, and so think twice before putting themselves at risk.

Perhaps the solution to this clinical dilemma is to actually install a condom-dispensing machine too. At least this way patients will be reminded to practise safer sex. Then it could be win-win all round. The Trust makes money from the various sales, the patient gets loads of sex, and as the doctor I'm happy because it's safer sex and all the shagging should burn off the confectionery-added calories. It would be as one of my more streetwise patients said when I gave him the 'all clear': "Sweet". Oh, I have got 50 pence after all. Now, what shall I have...?

J Fam Plann Reprod Health Care 2008; 34(3): 191

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