

# The economics of disease

BY ARIEL J.D. GORDON

It's almost Kidney Month again. As March nears, a virtual onslaught of print ads, radio spots, and television commercials will appear, all proclaiming the message of awareness and need.

Did you know there is an organ donor crisis in Canada? The Kidney Foundation of Canada's goal is that you know this fact by the end of the month. And they'll use the same avenues that corporations selling everything from gum to beer use. They'll tell you over and over and over, until you know. And then, theoretically, you'll be more willing to donate — so out go the 80,000 or so volunteers to solicit financial donations door to door across Canada.

The Kidney Foundation receives \$12 million in donations annually; \$3.8 million goes to research, \$2.0 million to patient services, and \$1.3 million to organ donor awareness programs. That leaves \$4.9 million, which is spent on volunteer training, management, strategizing and fundraising costs.

Basically, it takes funds to fundraise. And maybe that's the problem. The Kidney Foundation, among others, is resorting to what some might call propaganda to get their message — however valid — across.

"Usually, propaganda uses emotional appeals to promote the desired behavior," explains Bruce Wark, a journalism professor at the University of King's College who teaches an ethics course. "For instance, if I wanted you to do something, say give money, I would try to move you one way or another. In fundraising, they usually use one's sense of responsibility towards other people and their sense of pity — appealing to people's compassion."

The staff at the Kidney Foundation seem aware of this strategy. For the second year in a row, the Kidney Foundation is using an ad that shows a young girl, "Michelle," playing, with the words "Organ Donation Gave Michelle a Second Chance" across the bottom.

"Yes, it was deliberate," says Rhonda O'Gallagher, Communications Manager with the Kidney Foundation of Canada. "We did market research with donors from our direct mail campaign, and they told us to promote organ donation and to use children. Children make people stop and think — people sort of connect with children. So it is a market strategy, definitely."

The "Michelle" ad goes out to 2,500 media outlets nationwide. O'Gallagher estimates they get over a million dollars of free advertising a year — and that's just print. She does not know how much the TV and radio advertising they get is worth.

"Our policy is that we don't pay for ads," O'Gallagher says. "We can't afford to pay, really."

To put these campaigns together, the Foundation works with an ad agency to create the material. The agency either works almost at cost, or for charitable tax receipts. The Kidney Foundation then pays for the production of the ads, which includes high-

quality paper for print ads, or videocassettes for the television variety. The same lower price or tax receipt deal can apply with the printer.

O'Gallagher then creates a folder to go with her ads, for the editors of the media outlets on her list. She includes an emotion-ridden letter from the president of the Kidney Foundation on the first page, with a big banner across the top saying, "YOU have a role to play." The editors are supposed to both devote space to the Kidney Foundation ads as well as write a sympathetic story to go with it, all in the name of a good cause.

Wark remarks, "Part of an effective campaign involves trying to use the media to generate stories about the disease, research efforts, breakthroughs."

"That way, people not only see the ads, and maybe get asked over the phone for money, but they read articles about it. Their awareness has been raised, and it persuades them to give. One thing is not enough — you can't just phone someone and ask for money."

Why do the media play along? Wark says it's a combination of a few things — they want to help in their own way, and, less altruistically, they need material to fill space or airtime.

"CBC radio used to do something they jokingly called 'disease of the week,' where they would bring in people to speak about the various diseases," says Wark.

Wark says it's almost too easy to do these kinds of stories.

"You can call the PR people, and they'll find information for you," he explains. "You can even ask them to find 'victims' for you. So, if I was doing a story on kidney disease, I could probably call one of them up and request a person who'd had a transplant and was doing well, and someone who was doing not so well."

O'Gallagher says that this year's effort cost just over \$10,000 dollars, including postage, production costs, and the cost of obtaining the media list. Three people worked full-time to pull the campaign together, and it took them the better part of a week just to stuff all the envelopes.

In terms of the Kidney Foundation's specific message, O'Gallagher says that they're pretty low-key.

"Some scare, some inform," she says. "The Kidney Foundation has chosen public awareness. We're not a big flashy organization. We're conservative. We try to produce classy things."

O'Gallagher could be referring to the more daring campaigns of the Kids Help Line or the Canadian Diabetes Association, both of which use more hard-hitting ads to get the public's attention.

This year's Canadian Diabetes Association ads, appearing on buses across the country free of charge, read like this:

"BY THE TIME you get home, seven more people in Canada will have diabetes (14 if the traffic is bad)."

IF 1.5 MILLION Canadians shouted "Diabetes is an epidemic," would you hear it then?

Lisa Schmidt is the Communications Assistant at the Diabetes

Association. She says her organization purposefully takes a harder stance when it comes to informing people about the disease.

"It's a fine line," says Schmidt carefully. "Something we struggle with, definitely."

One TV ad features a parent and child discussing diabetes — can it be "fixed?" Words like "blindness" and "kidney failure" flash across the screen at intervals. Some people, even the parents of diabetics, think this ad goes a bit too far. Some of them call to complain.

"Usually, we don't get very many calls, but when your messages are harder hitting..." Schmidt says. "One thing we struggle with in our public awareness campaigns is: is this message alienating people who already have diabetes? We have to make a decision every single time as to what message we want to get out."

Schmidt says the statistics themselves explain why the Diabetes Association uses such aggressive marketing. The CDA predicts that one in four people over the age of forty-five will have diabetes by the year 2004. That constitutes twenty per cent of the population — nearly double the current statistics.

The Canadian Diabetes Association spends just over \$11 million dollars annually getting that message across, in three separate fundraising/awareness campaigns. Schmidt says the CDA, unlike the Kidney Foundation, will sometimes pay for advertising, if they want to target a certain market.

As their literature explains, the CDA uses a variety of means to get their message across.

"CDA is a self-financing organization. This means we are able to accomplish our goals through the generous contributions of Canadians. Fundraising includes the door-to-door campaign during November (Diabetes Month), direct mail, planned giving, special events, literature sales, corporate giving and other sources."

Unlike the Kidney Foundation, the CDA keeps their management costs at nine per cent of their total donated revenue, around \$800,000. And while their total donations only add up to \$8.9 million dollars, the CDA has other sources of income, including \$5.3 million raised via investments, gaming and used clothing collections (Value Village), and \$3.3 million administered on behalf of the Ontario and Alberta governments for Monitoring for Health Programs. The latter program provides financial assistance to qualified recipients for blood glucose monitoring and testing.

And while the Kidney Foundation — according to 1994-95 figures — devotes \$3.8 million (or almost 32% of their total funding) to research, the Canadian Diabetes Association allocates \$4.3 million (or 47%) of their total funding.

The Kids Help Line is even more aggressive in terms of their message. One ad ran a single quote across the middle of the screen: "I think I've been raped. How do I know?" with "10 year-



Until a few months ago, kidney dialysis was her only chance. But then a kidney donor was found. Discuss organ donation with your family and sign a donor card today. If enough people do, we can give others like Michelle a second chance.



THE KIDNEY FOUNDATION OF CANADA

Public service or propoganda?

old caller" just underneath. Their final message? "We get 4,000 calls daily. 1,500 get through..."

Their help line's newly-created web-site (<http://kidshelp.sympatico.ca>) reflects this approach. The list of topics children can access are written in a font meant to look like graffiti on a brick wall. Topics range from eating disorders to sexual violence to abuse to STDs, and the material provided is detailed yet understandable.

That's not all that's there, however. Take a spin through the other links this site has to offer, and you'll find an ad for a cookbook put out by Nestle (Kids Help Phone gets half of the money), a seven page single-spaced list of all their corporate sponsors, and excerpts from the Kids Help Foundation's annual report, with a condensed balance sheet, and letters in language so full of business-ese that you'd think it was the work of a leading CEO.

Wark says groups like the Canadian Diabetes Association and the Kids Help Line are just taking the fundamentals of advertising — and propaganda — to the logical next step.

"There are so many appeals, it's getting harder and harder to raise money," he says. "You can't just make the statement 'There's this disease and we badly need money'; you need to get through all that noise and get people's attention. You need to give people a reason to donate, and it's usually emotion — 'This could be you, so we need money.'"

Wark says that although charities like the CDA and the Kidney Foundation use propaganda to accomplish their goals, he can't imagine them raising the needed money any other way.

"I'm very interested in propaganda," he says, "because everybody has to resort to it."

Lisa Schmidt, of the Canadian Diabetes Association, sees her work differently.

"I feel like I can have a positive influence on what's happening in the world," she says. "The work that I do can impact positively. I could use the same skills in an ad agency writing ads for cigarettes instead of promoting health — I get great satisfaction from knowing I am having a positive impact."

And whether or not all the ad campaigns, month after month, lead the public to tune out the slew of what the charities call "public service announcements" that appear on buses, in newspapers, and on TV like they would any other form of advertising, it's not likely the charities are going to stop using these media. Some positive impact is better than none.

As well, it is not likely they will stop spending the money necessary for professional-looking ads and divert it to more services, more research, because it's also not likely that you or I would contribute in the same numbers if they didn't.

By the way, it's currently Alzheimer's month. There are 10,000 Nova Scotians with Alzheimer's. Please help turn Alzheimer's into a memory.