

Film Review

Innerstate: The First Disease Awareness Documentary Film

By John Mack

Al Gore's documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" picked up the Oscar this year for best documentary. Like many documentaries, it's a PR piece. But don't expect the film "Innerstate" produced by PR folks at Centocor Inc. to even be nominated for the 80th iteration of the Oscars.

For those of you just awakening from your winter hibernation and who haven't been reading the comments in [The Pharma Blogosphere](#) lately, Innerstate is a "new kind of documentary" that tells the "heart-wrenching real stories" of three people suffering from immune diseases—rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis and Crohn's disease.

Centocor markets biologics for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis (RA), Crohn's disease, and psoriasis—the three conditions described in the film.

Here's how the film is described in Centocor's press release:

"...a first-of-its-kind documentary providing insight into the 'inner states' of three everyday adults facing chronic, life-altering inflammatory diseases. As they confront daily challenges and life's experiences, they tell the emotional stories of their journeys toward living 'normal' lives in a film that is sure to touch the hearts of all viewers, including the millions of Americans who suffer from these conditions. The premiere will take place on Wednesday, February 21, 2007 at the Directors Guild of America Theatre in New York."

Unfortunately, I—like many other bloggers and news reporters commenting on this film—missed the media screening held in New York City. The next option was to sign up on the Web site to attend a screening at a local theatre. Luckily, however, I did not have to wait for that.

The folks at Dorland Global Public Relations, which is the agency handling media relations for the film,

monitor my blog and within a day or two of my post ("[No Oscar for Centocor PR Effort](#)"), Michael Parks, Centocor's Director of Public Relations, and Executive Producer of Innerstate, invited me to a private screening in Dorland's Philadelphia office.

Keep Bloggers in the PR Loop

Before I present my review, however, I'd like to say a thing or two about the relationship between bloggers, the press, and the importance of including bloggers in the PR loop.

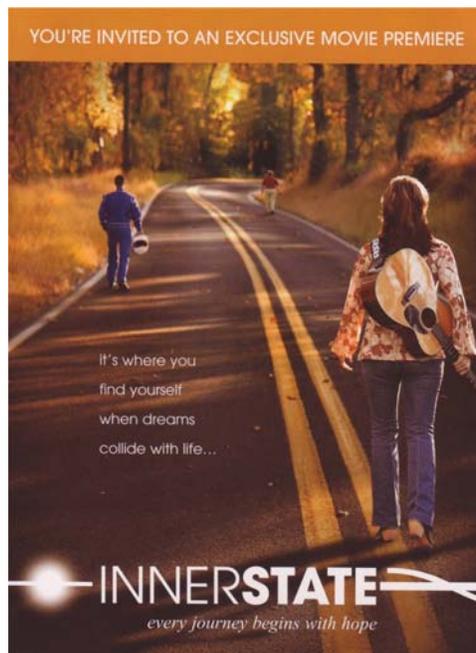
I could have been one of the many bloggers who commented on this film without actually having seen it. Most blogger comments were based on stories written in newspapers like the Philadelphia Inquirer. The press, claim pharmaceutical executives, is biased against the drug industry. If bloggers follow the lead of the press, then this bias carries over. (For more on the bias of bloggers, see the article "Are Pharma Bloggers Biased Against the Industry?" in this issue.)

These days, when practically everyone in the pharmaceutical industry is agog at what's happening in the blogosphere—namely patients and physicians blogs—it's not uncommon for PR people to reach out to bloggers. Perhaps Centocor did that with a few patient bloggers and invited them to the initial screening.

But they should have reached out to bloggers like me and pharma advertising critics like Alexander Sugerman-Brozan, director of the Boston-based Prescription Access Litigation Project. Sugerman-Brozan, you might remember, was a guest on my podcast about disease mongering (see article "Disease Mongering: When Is the Line Crossed?" in this issue).

Sugerman-Brozan, as quoted in the Philadelphia Inquirer, measured his criticism carefully:

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"We need to be skeptical of disease-awareness campaigns that come from a company with a vested interest," said Sugerman-Brozan, who has not yet seen the film. "The first out of the gate is not necessarily the problematic one."

Maybe Sugerman-Brozan was invited to the screening and declined to go, but I suspect, like me, he was not invited. Perhaps he would have been less skeptical and more positive about the film if he had seen it.

Bloggers can be even crueler as evidenced by this comment:

"Okay, we know DTC ads are under attack for flouting side effects and pushing consumers to ask their docs for meds they don't need. So J&J is being clever. Let's give them that. But let's not pretend a 'documentary' isn't an ad when the producer has such a vested interest. What's next? A Broadway musical featuring children with ADHD who sing and dance their way to a happy ending after taking Concerta?"

This was written by journalist blogger Ed Silverman (Pharmalot) who may or may NOT have seen the film (I suspect not, otherwise he would have mentioned it in his blog post).

LESSON: If you wish to get fair treatment by bloggers, you need to keep us in the loop.

Is It a Valid Format for Disease Awareness?

Centocor is taking a "hands-on" approach with Innertsate. According to the Inquirer article, Parks "personally sifted through the stories of 40 patients to pick the three for the documentary." He is also overseeing the film's theatrical release.

Other pharmaceutical companies have provided educational grants to independent producers to support disease education documentaries. GSK, for example, provided funding for the PBS show "Fat: What No One is Telling You." GSK, you recall, is marketing the over-the-counter weight loss product Alli (see "[Alli Oops! I Just Pooped Myself!](#)").

But even this "hands-off" approach has drawn criticism (see "[PBS obesity program under fire](#)"). In this case, however, the criticism was leveled at PBS for accepting the money, not at GSK for providing it!

Private Screening: Philadelphia Style

Before the screening, I was convinced that the stories may have been true but because Centocor has taken such a hands-on approach in producing

the film, I suspected that the words were carefully scripted by Centocor PR flacks.

So, one fine but cold day in March, I braved unusually horrendous Philly traffic to show up at Dorland's offices on South Broad Street—thank you guy in pickup truck who allowed me to wedge in front of you to make that incredibly tight right-hand turn in front of City Hall!

When I got to Dorland and entered the conference room where the screening was to take place, who is sitting there but Michael Parks! I did not expect this, but it was definitely a benefit to have him there to introduce the film and answer my questions, which he did without hesitation.

Parks explained how the film got produced and what his goals were. He also stayed through the whole 58 minutes running time of the film and watched it again even though he's probably seen it a hundred times! I'm sure, however, like any executive producer, Parks never gets tired of watching his "baby."

The screening erased two of my pre-conceived notions.

First, I must admit that Parks does not appear to be your standard PR "flack." Parks took the initiative to invite me to a screening and then spent time answering my questions. Of course, it is the job of a PR person to deal with the "press," but many do not seem to have the time or inclination to deal with bloggers. I suspect this attitude is changing.

Second, I have to say now that the words definitely were NOT scripted. They are obviously true stories told by real patients in their own words. Undoubtedly, the scenes were carefully edited, but no one put words in these peoples' mouths.

Cheaper Than a TV DTC Campaign

None of the actors—patients, family members, physicians—was paid to be in the film, which was directed by Chris Valentino, a relatively unknown director. Parks told me that Valentino previously directed a film entitled "Brooklyn Mobster," but I could not find anything about this film in a Google search. I did find the film "Brooklyn Lobster," however. Valentino was a producer for this film, not a director. Either Parks misspoke or I misheard. Anyway, Valentino is not an expensive Hollywood director.

There is no narration except for a few words in the beginning of the film. It was all filmed on location in

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Texas and Maryland, I believe. And it was produced in-house.

Given all this, it's not surprising, therefore, that Parks claims Centocor spent "significantly less" on the film than would have been spent on a "full blown" DTC ad campaign. Considering that a "full blown" TV DTC campaign can cost \$140 million per year (think Lunesta), practically every producer of a major Hollywood film could say the same!

Real People Playing Themselves

There are three main characters in the film: "Jason, a restaurant manager living with psoriasis; Ray, a racecar driver and NASCAR® hopeful sidetracked by Crohn's disease; and Janie, an aspiring country music artist living with rheumatoid arthritis (RA)." Not only are these ordinary people, they are refreshing real like the people you see in YouTube videos. They are not glamorous or even good-looking—except to their moms and dads who also appear in the film.

The people and stories were carefully chosen by Parks to convey the proper message, which is: these conditions are often misdiagnosed and not adequately treated and only "biologics" eventually prove effective. Jason, for example, endured treatments with tar and Vaseline as a kid and Ray was not properly diagnosed until he finally saw a specialist. Parks rejected an athlete for a role

because he had access to the best doctors that properly diagnosed and treated him before the condition could worsen—not a "heart-wrenching" story to be sure.

In this way, Parks was able to control the content to the point where I cannot be sure these are typical case histories. But, as in any movie, you have to suspend your disbelief to enjoy the show.

Location, Location, Location

Everything is shot on location, albeit a little bit too southern Americana for a former New York City-slicker like myself. There's lots of country roads signs, American flags, railroad crossings, pick up trucks, etc. Mostly in Texas, too! But there's no makeup and no fancy sets. The director, however, uses a special kind of cinematography to focus in on the people and keep most of the shabby backgrounds out of focus.

Intertwining Stories

Instead of devoting a section of the film to each person's story, all three stories were intertwined. One minute your listening to Jason recounting a childhood story about being shunned at a pool when he was in the midst of a flare-up and the next minute Janie's dad is describing her courage performing on stage in great pain. It was difficult to keep up with the characters and remember who was Ray's friend or Jason's mom.

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Figure: "Ray's" story as seen on the Innerstate Web Site.

Parks said this was done purposely to bring home the point that all three of the conditions had a common cause that was treatable by the same medication.

Cannot Escape DTC Roots

The only part that sounded scripted was when the physicians rattled off the serious side effects of the new "biologics" that are the film's unbranded heroes. This information, which is probably not necessary to provide in unbranded disease awareness productions such as this, was presented in the conventional manner that we are all familiar with from watching TV DTC ads. Parks emphasized that although not required, he was committed to present this information and even keep in a bit where one of the patients mentioned an adverse reaction.

Repurposing Clips from the Movie

Speaking of TV DTC ads, I asked Parks if he had any plans to use clips of the film in branded TV ads. He said "absolutely not" at least not as long as he has anything to say about it.

My good friend Harry Sweeney, Dorland's Chairman and CEO, who was in the room at that point, suggested that one should never say "never."

In fact, I agree with Harry. It's refreshing to see real people—not actors—talking in their own words and not using scripts. It's very appropriate in this day of consumer generated content (CGC), YouTube, and Myspace. I don't see why these clips and people cannot be used in real ads or on the product Web site.

Actually, I can think of one reason why not. As mentioned above, none of the people in the film was paid, not even the docs. Parks said there were a lot of people who auditioned and all of them wanted to tell their stories without being paid. Not being paid for an unbranded disease awareness film is one thing, but not being paid for appearing in branded TV ads or Web sites is another.

Still, there is precedent: note that CGC content was used in some Super Bowl ads and a recent Dove ad I saw. None of these people was paid, although "winners" did get some cash-equivalent rewards—a Super Bowl ticket or perhaps a lifetime supply of Dove body wash!

It's an axiom of CGC that the consumer doesn't get paid. That's great for the advertiser, but not so good for the consumer. I guess you'll always be able to find someone who wants his or her "15

minutes of fame" and is willing to work for free to get it.

Look for Awards

The only criticism I had was that the film seemed too long. It could have ended at several different points and shaved off about 15 minutes. But then it wouldn't be a feature-length documentary, which is a distinctive film award category.

While I joke about Innerstate not being an Academy Award contender, Parks does have plans to submit the film for other awards. We're not talking about the awards that marketers give each other—those don't count for much outside the industry. Parks, being the PR person that he is, surely is focused on winning accolades from the outside, not the inside. I wish him luck!

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