

On Site: Toshiba Ultrabook TV Ad Puts Clinical Trials in Spotlight, Spurring ACRO into Action Over Patient Portrayal

A Toshiba television ad that ran nationally a few months ago seems to have unleashed a pro-clinical research campaign among those in the industry, with the Association of Clinical Research Organizations (ACRO) leading the charge.

The ad, focusing on the intense testing process of the Toshiba Satellite Ultrabook computer before its commercial release, featured a “professional medical test subject” in a hospital gown at a research site taking part in a series of horrible tests. His arms flail, his head sizzles and, in the end, he’s purple as he states, “Testing unfinished products on the public? That’s inhumane.”

After seeing the ad, ACRO, which represents the largest CROs, wrote Toshiba to voice its concerns that the ad could dissuade participation in clinical trials, which the industry cannot afford. After all, only 4% of the population participates in clinical trials, ACRO pointed out. It asked Toshiba to stop running the ad.

“ACRO has been working with regulators globally to ensure every patient participating in clinical research, whether in India or Indiana, is treated with respect and afforded basic human rights,” ACRO executive director Doug Peddicord wrote in the letter. “So when we saw your latest advertising commercial attempting to use humor by identifying clinical research participants in a derogatory manner, we found it extremely offensive and beneath what we believed to have been Toshiba’s corporate standards.”

According to John Lewis, spokesman for ACRO, Toshiba’s response was perfunctory, saying basically: thank you for your concern; we’ll keep that in mind, he said.

Lewis said the whole thing is rather ironic.

“Toshiba has a medical imaging business,” he said. “You’d think they’d be aware that they may be offending their own customers.”

The publication *Ad Week* ran a short piece on the matter, saying, “Given the relatively small audience of medical testing volunteers, it’s unlikely Toshiba will give in to demands to pull the ad or issue an apology.”

And so far it has not, though Lewis said no one has seen the ad in several weeks.

But ACRO decided to take matters into its own hands. Peddicord penned a blog about the ad and posted it on *The Huffington Post*. In the blog, he also mentioned two other developments, one troubling and one not:

- Reality television producer Robert Mazza, who has ties to *Apprentice* and *Survivor* executive producer Mark Burnett, announced via his Twitter account that he was seeking contestants for a new reality TV show in which contestants will be paid to participate in clinical trials and other experiments. (In response, ACRO requested the FDA investigate this for possible violations of human subject protections and other regulations).
- CBS has picked up a pilot for a medical drama about a group of doctors running clinical trials in a Philadelphia hospital. Wrote Peddicord, “While the working title of the show — ‘Guinea Pigs’ — is highly offensive, CBS’s reputation for producing high-quality dramas may result in a balanced, thoughtful look at clinical trials, the people who participate in them and the medical professionals who oversee them.”

In addition to Peddicord's blog on *The Huffington Post*, ACRO's Lewis also taped a video and posted it on YouTube. He made many of the same points in his piece.

Despite the lack of a meaningful response from Toshiba, Lewis is happy with the momentum ACRO has spawned on the issue.

"I think we made our point that that kind of negative image is damaging to what we're trying to do," said Lewis. "We don't want people to think we don't have a sense of humor, but when we see these things going over the line, that's when we think we have to step in."

More recently, FasterCures has gotten involved. FasterCures is a Washington, D.C.-based think tank focused on saving time in the discovery, development and deployment of new therapies for deadly and debilitating diseases. Lewis said FasterCures staff saw ACRO's YouTube spot and asked the organization to do a similar spot for FasterCures' new campaign, Time Equals Lives.

Time Equals Lives has its own web site featuring compelling personal stories about why research matters. "When woven together collectively, these stories create an imperative to make medical research a national priority," the site reads.

Amid these personal stories one can click on, Lewis presents his case for why clinical trials matter.

This ACRO campaign likely will continue in other forms and in other places.

"PhRMA and BIO have a lot of issues to focus on for their industries, though they know clinical trials are absolutely essential to the development of their products. But the job of defending clinical trials from an industry perspective falls to ACRO," he said. "It's up to us to point out that this barrage of negative portrayal is going to slow down the research process and ultimately damage our healthcare system."

It started as a reaction to Toshiba's ad, but it has gone so much further, he said.

"We said to our Board, 'Our goal is not to put this on our YouTube channel and get thousands of hits, but rather our goal is to make people aware of this in a much broader sense,'" said Lewis. "The goal is to see the public react and respond. And yeah, we'd love to see Toshiba pull the ad, but we'd also love to have the public say, 'Yeah, this isn't right.'"

ACRO's campaign will continue with other partners soon, said Lewis.

—Suz Redfern

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