



national association of addiction treatment providers

PRESS RELEASE

ABC Program “I Can’t Help Myself” is not a News Program

NAATP challenges ABC to identify their programs for what they are...either entertainment or an ABC *infomercial*

The National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers is challenging the ABC News programming department to identify their programs for what they are. On April 21, 2003 they aired a program “I Can’t Help Myself” as a news program using an ABC reporter John Stossel as the host and prime reporter. The program was neither a news program nor an accurate report on addiction treatment. As a response, NAATP has sent the following letter to Mr. David Westin the President of ABC News.

April 22, 2003

David Westin, ABCNews, President
ABC, Inc.
500 S. Buana Vista Street
Burbank, CA 91521-4551

Dear Mr. Westin:

Last evening (April 21, 2003) The ABC network utilized an hour of prime time television to broadcast a program “*I Can’t Help Myself*” hosted by John Stossel, which now appears to have established a pattern by the ABC network. This is at least the third program produced by ABC that appears to have as its sole intent to chip away at the disease understanding of addiction.

This particular program did not meet the usual high standards established by the ABC network. The program did not have any significant reporting in terms of research and it did not appear to have a point-counter-point format where a theme or question could be explored. Rather the program was built on a particular view point which may very well be the official position of the ABC network. That point of view is that addiction does not exist as a disease! This particular point of view was presented but never developed or explored from either a news reporting point of view or from a research point of view.



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Throughout the broadcast there was repeated reference to addiction and its “label” as a disease, but there was no effort to include material from medical research or federal agencies, which have been supporting research on addictions for the past 25 years. There was no mention of any of the recent neurological research showing significant neurotransmitter and structural brain differences between those individuals diagnosed as addicted and those not diagnosed as such. Also missing were recent findings from the human genome project and other research that has identified a number of chromosomes containing loci associated with alcohol and other substance dependence. In other words, the program presented a biased and unscientific treatment of a very serious public health problem. The material presented in the program represented the work of persons representing pop culture and not science!

Likewise, this program presented a very superficial and simplistic understanding of treatment and recovery associated with the disease of addiction. Having been involved in addiction treatment for over 25 years, I do not know of a program that does not have persons take responsibility for the behavior that has resulted from their addiction. The difference between the reality and the program’s portrayal of treatment is that treatment provides addicted individuals the skills, coaching, and supports proven to improve the probability of recovery and restoration of functioning. No treatment for addictions or any other medical condition is 100% effective, but over two decades of research have consistently demonstrated that treatment improves the odds over trying to recovery on one’s own.

The ABC program left the viewer with the opposite impression by stating that most individuals recover without treatment. Not only can such a statement not be scientifically demonstrated, it also ignores the fact that many addicted individuals die prematurely rather than recover. The documentation of mortality rates of addicted individuals consistently reveals multiples of expected rates for age comparable groups.

Perhaps the most damning result of this program is that thousands, or more likely millions, of alcoholics and persons addicted to other drugs are now again left with the nagging impression that they are just bad people who need not seek help for their addictions. Your program has the potential to keep persons from seeking help as opposed to seeking out the help they need to begin the recovery process.

The National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers is a trade association that represents programs and organizations that deliver addiction treatment across the country. We have a wide variety of programs and approaches represented in our membership. We stand ready to assist the ABC network as it continues to present information on addictions, treatment and recovery. However, we are also committed to



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calling attention to inaccurate information, to biased presentations and to a lack of balance when it appears as it did on the John Stossel program on April 21, 2003.

It is the collective opinion of this association that the program aired on April 21, 2003 did not represent news reporting and thus should have either been aired as an entertainment piece or as an *infomercial* with appropriate indication as to the sponsor of this information. To suggest that this was reporting on a news item is to take great liberties with news reporting as we have come to such reporting.

We would be more than pleased to meet with members of your reporting staff to provide them with additional information should you choose to present information on addictions in the future. We can also provide contact information with researchers in this area so that more appropriate background materials can be developed for any future programs.

Sincerely,

Ronald J. Hunsicker, D. Min.
President/CEO

The National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers is a trade association representing over 225 of the best known providers of addiction treatment both in this country and internationally. The National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers' office and executive Dr. Ronald J. Hunsicker are located in Lancaster, PA and NAATP is governed by a Board of Directors from across the country. Additional information on this award or on the work of the National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers may be obtained by contacting the NAATP office at 717-392-8480.