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# **Health and the social construction of masculinity in *Men's Health* magazine.**

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## **Abstract**

Although health has not traditionally been a male concern, the last few years have seen the 'gradual development of a shared, public concept of men's health' (Courtenay and Keeling 2000:243). Among the leading participants in the construction of this concept is *Men's Health* magazine. In this paper, a sample of six issues of *Men's Health* (June – December 2000) are critically analyzed in order to reveal the ideological assumptions on which the discourse of the magazine is based. Evidence is presented which suggests that *Men's Health* magazine, while giving abundant health advice, does so in a way which reproduces a type of hegemonic masculinity associated not with health, but with a variety of negative health behaviors.

*Keywords:* men's health, critical discourse analysis, social construction, masculinity, magazines

## **Introduction**

Men, it seems, are doing something wrong. For most of this century male life expectancy has been consistently lower for men than for women (Furber 1999:91). Males have 'higher mortality than females for total mortality and for most causes of death in contemporary developed countries' (Waldron 2000:150). In the US, 'men die more than six years younger than women' (Courtenay 2000a:81). Men's excess mortality cannot be attributed to biological factors alone, leaving at least part of the blame on 'psychological, social and behavioral factors' (Helgeson 1995:62), that is, what men are doing.

Courtenay's (2000a) report on 'Behavioral factors associated with disease, injury and death among men' lists over 30 behaviors in which men have greater involvement than women, and which are known to lead to health problems, including smoking, bad diet, excess alcohol consumption, and risk taking. However, as Courtenay points out in the conclusion of his report, very little 'is known about the psychosocial mechanisms that mediate these behaviors' (ibid.:109).

Helgeson (1995:68) claims that 'a sizeable portion of men's excess mortality is linked to masculine identity, men's roles, and gendered patterns of socialization'. The construction of gender within society creates differing patterns of expectation for men and women, which in turn lead to different behavior and health risks. According to Berger et al (1995:2), gender is articulated 'through a variety of positions, languages, institutions and apparatuses', and constructed from 'a complex web of influences'. When it comes to health behavior, influences may include books, films, images on television, the advice of doctors, the comments or teasing of friends, and quite recently for men, magazines.

In December 2000, a magazine with a cover picture of a huge, muscular, male torso and the bold red letters 'Build This Body!' was on the newsstands. *Men's Health* magazine has a circulation of approximately 1,650,000 in the US and more than twice that number internationally. It is providing for men what women have had for a very long time: a lifestyle magazine which gives advice on every aspect of living from sex to shoes, and, incidentally, health.

While there is a large amount of feminist literature on the construction of femininity in women's magazines, the corresponding literature on men's magazines is limited, and tends to focus on the construction of the male consumer (e.g., Greenfield et al 1999, Breazeale 1994). The feminist analysis can, however, be extended to men's magazines, and particularly health magazines.

Courtenay suggests that there is a link between male power, the construction of masculinity, and unhealthy behavior:

By successfully using unhealthy beliefs and behaviors to demonstrate idealized forms of masculinity, men are able to assume positions of power – relative to women and less powerful men – in a patriarchal society that rewards this accomplishment. (Courtenay 2000b:1397)

The idea that men act in ways that damage their health in order to gain power and privilege has profound implications both for gender equality and health promotion. This paper focuses on the role that *Men's Health* magazine plays in the mediation of masculinity and health behavior.

## **Masculinity and male power**

True masculinity, according to Connell (1995:45) is 'almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies'. It is therefore intimately linked with health, providing 'the focal point of self-construction as well as health construction' (Saltonstall 1993:12).

However, 'masculinity' is, as Berger et al (1995:2) describe, a 'vexed term, variously inflected, multiply defined, not limited to straight forward descriptions of maleness.' (Berger et al:2). What is certain is that 'nothing like one-way determination of the social by the biological can be sustained' (Connell 1995:47). Biological determinism, which sees gender differences as biologically based, and therefore natural, inevitable and unchangeable, is an ideological position used to justify and perpetuate male power. In challenging this position, masculinity is often taken to the opposite extreme, and treated as a wholly socially constructed phenomenon, for example:

Masculinity is...a concept that bears only an adventitious relation to biological sex and whose various manifestations collectively constitute the cultural, social, and psychosexual expression of gender (Solomon-Godeau 1995:71)

But, as Brittan (1989:14) points out, 'men and women...do not exist outside their bodies', and this approach misses the role that bodies play within human interaction and society. In Connell's (1995) approach, 'bodies are seen as sharing in social agency, in generating and shaping courses of social conduct' (Connell 1995:54).

The biological may not determine the social, but that does not stop men from 'artificially attaching all manner of power and privilege to biological differences' (Klein 1993:5) in order to gain power over women. For example, men's 'greater sporting prowess', which is related to biological factors, is given social significance and becomes 'symbolic proof of men's superiority' (Connell 1995:54).

However multiple and contested the concept may be, there is one form of masculinity which appears repeatedly in the literature, albeit with different names and slightly different definitions. The names include 'hegemonic' masculinity (Connell 1995), 'traditional' masculinity (Helgeson 1995), 'dominant' masculinity (Courtenay 2000b), and 'negative or extreme' masculinity (Helgeson 1995). While styles of masculinity change, what does not so easily change is the 'justification and naturalization of male power' (Brittan 1989:2). Hegemonic masculinity, as an 'expression of the privilege men collectively have over women' (Connell 1996:209), is therefore the least likely to change, particularly in those aspects which exploit biological factors. It is this form of masculinity which leads to the negative health behaviors described by Courtenay (2000a), and is most in need of challenging by publications related to men's health.

### ***Hegemonic masculinity and discourse***

Hegemony is power which 'makes people act as if it were natural, normal, or simply a consensus' (van Dijk 1997:19). In the case of masculinity, 'traditional characteristics of masculinity are made to seem so correct and natural that men find ... domination ... not just expected, but actually demanded.' (Craig 1992:3).

Hegemonic masculinity is reproduced through discourses which make it seem natural, inevitable, and morally right that men behave in particular ways: Bhabha (1995:57) was asked 'Are you a man or a mouse?' by his father, a question which presupposes bravery to be a natural feature of masculinity. But hegemonic discourses both can be, and are, challenged through counter discourses such as the discourse of feminism.

Following the general linguistic turn in the humanities, the study of gender is moving towards the analysis of the 'construction of a range of masculinities and femininities through a range of gendered discourse in a range of topically-related texts' (Sunderland 2000:250). This approach to gender assumes a dialectic relationship between social practice and discourse, where discourse is both 'shaped and constrained by social structure' as well as 'socially constitutive' (Fairclough 1992:64).

Counter discourse offers a means to challenge some of the aspects of hegemonic masculinity that lead to negative health behavior. However, this paper will argue that *Men's Health* magazine is steeped in traditional masculine ideology, and fails to challenge the discourse of hegemonic masculinity in the interest of health.

### ***Masculinist ideology in Men's Health magazine***

Hegemonic masculinity is 'embodied in heterosexual, highly educated, European American men of upper-class economic status' (Courtenay 2000b:1388). To its commercial advantage, *Men's Health* magazine is aimed at exactly this group. The South African edition expresses this metaphorically as:

[*Men's Health*] provides focused penetration directly at the affluent, male market, delivering sophisticated, upscale males to discerning advertisers. (South Africa 2000)

Brittan (1989:5) has problems with analyses which assume men have a 'collective ideology', since men do not constitute a class. However, the men targeted by *Men's Health* do form a class, and it is the class with most to gain from the reproduction of male domination. The intended readership can be seen in quotes such as the following, which describes the situation of being pulled over by a cop<sup>1</sup>:

- ◆ Here's how his [the cop's] life stacks up against yours: He doesn't have your MBA, he's not holding your stock options, and he's not next in line for that CEO slot. (*Men's Health*, US edition, September 2000:128)

The magazine itself is politically conservative, encouraging voters to 'Vote for someone who will cut taxes' (October 2000:94), and frequently questioning the masculinity of Al Gore 'who 'will never be cool' unless he lives 'to be 100 and die[s] in bed surrounded by naked nurses' (October:97), and the Democratic party 'In case you don't know which way to vote: Democrats are more likely than Republicans to own a cat.' (September:50). The ideology of the magazine is reflected in many of the items listed in the article '138 things a man should never apologize for', some of which appear below (September:90):

- ◆ As decent, honorable men, we should never apologize for...

Liking McDonalds  
Not offering a vegetarian alternative  
Wearing fur or leather  
Laughing at people who eat trail mix  
Reading pornography regularly  
Ordering the veal  
Calling women girls  
Putting your feet up on something...  
...like say, your wife  
liking guns  
holding a door open for a woman (September:90)

Rutherford (1998:4) describes the way that 'in the post-feminist era of the 1990s, there has been growing disaffection amongst middle class men with the ideal of sexual equality'. This is reflected in the list above, as well as disaffection with other groups that challenge domination such as animal rights activists and gun control lobbyists. The anti-feminist stance is revealed in an article about choosing a university for your son. The questions to ask are 'Do campus officials parrot the feminist myths? How cranky is the women's studies department? Exactly what is the sexual-harassment policy?' (September:122). The ideal school is one where 'the traditional male view is appreciated' (September:121).

As well as health, *Men's Health* appears to have a masculinist agenda of power: 'Why We Wear the Pants: Everything we write about is for one purpose – we want to help men control their lives' (September:26). This is not just power over women, but power over other men too: 'Anger is a virtue...without a temper...your boss will continually step on your face' (November:58), 'When you have it in for a guy, don't have it in halfway. Make the blade come out through his spine.' (June:54).

*Men's Health* is therefore in an anomalous position. It is written for the men who are most exposed to, and have most to gain from, the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, and has an openly admitted agenda of promoting 'the traditional male view'. On the other hand, traditional masculinity has been shown to involve a large number of negative health behaviors such as excessive alcohol consumption and risky behavior.

As Courtenay (2000a) points out, health is traditionally a female rather than male concern. Lifestyle magazines too, with a few exceptions such as *Esquire* and *GQ*, are almost exclusively aimed at women. *Men's Health* is therefore forging a new kind of discourse, which goes beyond the dry, scientific discourse of books like Brewer's (1995) *A Complete Guide to Men's Health*, and beyond what Haines (1998) calls the 'soul-withering monotony of weight training instruction'.

To provide an analysis of this emergent discourse and the ideological assumptions on which it is based, six issues of the US edition of *Men's Health* (June 2000-December 2000), were analyzed in detail within a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework (Fairclough 1992, 1989, Fowler 1991, van Dijk 1997, 1993). CDA provides 'an account of the role of language, language use, discourse or communicative events in the (re)production of dominance...' (van Dijk 1993:282). It involves the analysis of linguistic features such as vocabulary, grammar, textual structures, and punctuation, in order to reveal hidden ideological assumptions on which discourse is based (Fairclough's 1992, 1989).

The analysis focuses on the interaction of three aspects: a) The discursive construction of masculinity in the magazine through the creation of images of the ideal man, b) the magazine's role in reproducing male

power, and c) men's health behavior, particularly the negative health behaviors associated with hegemonic masculinity listed by Courtenay (2000a).

### **Analysis and discussion**

Although there are many different writers in *Men's Health*, there are two main discourses which intertwine throughout the magazine: the discourse of medical science and the discourse of the 'buddy'. This 'buddy' is a deliberate creation of the magazine: 'We are like a buddy...not some pompous know-it-all.' (*Men's Health* editor, Stump 1999). The 'buddy' acts as an intermediary, explaining and interpreting medical science for the reader. The following extract reveals the meshing together of the two discourses:

- ◆ A...preliminary study from the Rowett Research Institute...found that a compound P3 in the yellow goop around tomato seeds reduced platelet clumping by 72 percent. Lower platelet aggregation reduces the risk of blood clots...[next section]...if your blood tests show elevated levels of homocysteine, substitute a cold frosty one for the Merlot. Scientists...gave a group of men wine, beer, gin, or water with dinner... The wine and gin raised homocysteine levels a bit; the beer didn't. (November:26)

In this extract, terms such as 'platelet aggregation' and 'homocysteine levels' from authoritative medical discourse are used, but associated with scientists or researchers. At the same time, this discourse is mixed with informal terms such as 'yellow goop' and 'a cold frosty one', reminding the reader that it is the buddy speaking, not the scientists. The buddy also interprets the science and draws conclusions in the familiar voice of the life-world: the contents page reduces the above extract to 'Why you need more pizza and beer' (November).

Given men's lack of health-care utilization (Courtenay 2000b:83), and unwillingness to see a doctor ('I don't go to the doctor unless something scares the hell out of me.' *Men's Health* editorial, June:16), the voice of the buddy plays an important role in terms of power relations. If men take the advice of a friend, they are not capitulating to a more powerful expert, the 'pompous know-it-all'. At the same time, the buddy claims the backing and support of the full force of medical authority in the form of scientists and researchers.

This powerful discursive device is used to offer advice to readers to help them fulfill their health goals and other desires. However, the reader's desires are partially constructed by the magazine itself through images of the ideal man: the 'definitive cultural icon of masculinity' in the words of *Men's Health* fitness editor, Lou Schuler (in Trebay 2000).

The ideals the magazine sets up for its readers to aim for can be seen in short imperative statements which follow the pattern of 'Win a cruise for two!' Imperatives such as these always contain a desirable goal, so placing any goal in this grammatical construction presupposes its desirability. Some of these goals, like 'Never have a heart attack' (June, cover) are straight, unproblematic health goals. Others, however, seem to involve an agenda which goes beyond health. The following sections highlight several aspects of the ideal man constructed by the magazine which appear to go beyond simple health considerations.

### **The ideal man: A bodybuilder**

The primary goal the magazine establishes through imperatives is increasing muscle size:

- ◆ ADD 2 inches to your chest (October, cover)
- ◆ BUILD ABS THAT SHOW. (July/August, cover)
- ◆ Build this body! → [arrow points to a huge muscular torso, expanded so large that most of the head and right shoulder cannot be seen] (December, cover)
- ◆ Look like a *Men's Health* cover model. [with picture of 4 muscular men] (December:110)

Isolated noun phrases are used in the same way:

- ◆ More Muscle, Faster. (July/August:25)
- ◆ SOLID MUSCLE! (November, cover)
- ◆ Bigger Muscles! (December, contents)
- ◆ Big biceps in 3 minutes (October, contents)

This orchestration of the desire for big muscles both reflects reality (Jacobi and Cash 1994 report that 91% percent of men want to be more muscular) and contributes to the construction and reproduction of the desire. The ideal shape is reflected by the 'cover models', a group of identically shaped men: hugely muscular, lean, tanned, body hair shaved:

- ◆ What does it take to look like a *Men's Health* cover model? Our top guys share their secrets, and show you how to get *the look you want*. (December, contents, emphasis added)

The noun phrase 'the look you want' presupposes 'you want to look' like the cover models. This gives no option for the reader to choose an ideal shape, perhaps a well-toned athletic body, from a number of alternatives. Even the article which shows a range of bodybuilders of different sizes is entitled 'How BIG can you get? Here's what it takes to move up in the world' (October:104 red emphasis in original). These bodybuilders weigh up to 225 pounds, with huge torsos, arms, and necks, but, in order to model trousers, surprisingly thin legs. The cosmetic nature of the muscularity is clear from comments such as, for one bodybuilder: 'he doesn't do any lifting with his legs' (October:104), for another 'he doesn't do any resistance exercise for his legs' (October:105). One *Men's Health* model, who ' marvels at how little exercise it takes to keep his body camera ready', 'does no cardiovascular exercise beyond a 5-minute warmup' (December:115).

The only way to achieve muscles like the cover models of *Men's Health* is to enter the world of bodybuilding, which Klein (1993:3) calls the 'subculture of hyperbole'. In *Men's Health*, hyperbole takes the form of simile:

- ◆ ARMS! Like Anacondas (That Just Ate a Pig) (September, cover)
- ◆ arms that bulge like VW beetles (October:45)
- ◆ arms that have more bulges than a plastic surgeon's mistress (November:32)
- ◆ abs...like speed bumps (July/August:115)

While doing anaerobic exercise and having adequate muscle mass and tone is clearly an important health goal, selectively developing huge muscles is not. Indeed, Thompson (1999) describes how ideals of muscularity can lead to steroid use, negative body image, eating disorders, and the recently occurring 'muscle dysmorphia' disorder in bodybuilders.

Bodybuilding, however, represents 'the most extreme view of masculinity our society has' (Klein 1993:18). If men compete with each other for power according to muscle size, men as a group win over women. Because 'bodybuilding fetishizes muscles, it further exaggerates gender-based characteristics...that are...loaded with cultural meaning' Klein (1992:106). The construction of the ideal man as hugely muscular therefore serves the ideological goal of reproducing male power.

It may also serve commercial goals. Most readers do not look like cover models, and without a huge amount of effort never will. This has the potential to create anxiety which keeps readers buying the magazine for the promise of short cuts to the far off goal.

### ***The ideal man: A meat eater***

While 'ADD 2 inches to your chest' could be considered a goal which is tangential to health in general, an imperative statement in the December issue 'Unleash your inner carnivore' (next to a picture of a bleeding steak) appears to encourage behavior which could actually damage health. The associated eight page 'Special Carnivore Section' is titled:

- ◆ Men and meat: There's only one kind of flesh we like better and even then she'd better know how to grill. (December:165-172).

According to Courtenay (2000a:90), 'the average man's diet is a major contributor to heart disease and cancer', particularly in lack of fiber, fruit and vegetables, and excess cholesterol, which 'the body produces after consuming animal fat'. He reports that 'males of all ages consume more saturated fat and dietary cholesterol than females...[and]...are less likely...to limit fat or red meat in their diet'. Red meat is also 'the food with the strongest positive link to advanced prostate cancer' (Brewer 1995:122). In her 'Complete guide to Men's Health', Brewer gives the direct advice 'Cut out red meat – or only eat it occasionally.' (ibid.:122) and 'have more vegetarian meals instead' (ibid.:199).

*Men's Health* magazine, on the other hand, while sometimes promoting the health properties of specific vegetables, never, in the sample analyzed, suggests a reduction in meat. Even in articles dealing with heart disease, cancer, diabetes or hemorrhoids, the magazine fails to link red meat with disease or any other negative consequences. Instead, meat, and particularly beef, is consistently associated with positive images of masculinity. The primary connection is via muscle:

- ◆ meat has big advantages over all other foods: It packs muscle-building protein... (December:166)
- ◆ Meat is loaded with the protein needed to build new muscle (December:166)

- ◆ The muscle stoker [recipe]...eat this meal and you'll grow your biceps...That's because the protein in the beef [1lb top London broil] helps to build new muscle tissue (July/August 87)
- ◆ make your meat beef and you'll also get testosterone-boosting amino acids. Testosterone helps you lift more weight and build more muscle. (November, p84)

These all specifically link eating meat to getting larger muscles, the primary target set up by the magazine for its readers. Beef is taken as a synonym for protein, quite literally in the following extract:

- ◆ I bought a steer...an impulse protein buy. Skippy [the steer]...was about to metamorphose into the best form of nourishment, namely, comestible protein. (December:170)

Brewer (1995:333), however, gives completely different advice: 'It is important not to eat too much protein...Try to obtain dietary protein from eating fish, white meat, wholegrains, nuts, seeds and beans rather than eating a lot of red meat'.

In addition to emphasizing the muscle building properties of meat, the magazine constructs a masculine image of meat. The article 'Your dinner personality' (September:49) consists of a series of pictures of food with a single, unattributed quote next to each, defining the associated personality. These quotes are derived in an unspecified way from a poll of 220 women, asked to say 'which meals impress them'. Predictably the beef has masculine attributes. The T-bone steak is 'Something a big man would eat', and has a picture of John Wayne, who Adams (1990:38) calls the 'epitome of the masculine meat eater'. The Filet Mignon says 'Classy, likes to indulge', and even the burger says 'The guy can be himself'. Chicken with rice, on the other hand, is 'too healthy', and the only vegetable dish, piled high with steamed vegetables (Pasta Primavera), is 'Dull choice, dull guy'. This imagery replaces the voice of doctors such as Brewer (1995) who say 'cut out red meat', with the voices of 220 woman who say 'order meat to impress me'.

Vegetables are not only portrayed as dull, but also as effeminate:

- ◆ Vegetables are for girls...If your instincts tell you a vegetarian diet isn't manly, you're right. One British study found that vegetarian women give birth to girls more often than meat eating women. (December 66).

This humor, like much of the humor in the magazine, is loaded with gender ideology. Another instance of this is:

- ◆ Your body needs dietary fat to produce testosterone, so eating like a vegetarian aerobics instructor will cause your testosterone levels to sink drastically. That is bad, unless you actually are a vegetarian aerobics instructor (December:106).

The word 'vegetarian' is inserted here gratuitously (the same article says that it is monounsaturated fat from vegetable sources which boosts testosterone). It does, however, achieve a link between vegetarianism, aerobics (associated with women), and depleted testosterone (symbolic of depleted masculinity).

Men's meat eating behavior is treated as if it is inevitable, a given which cannot be changed. An article on how to avoid fat in restaurants advises:

- ◆ Order the steak – plain. Many chefs pour at least an ounce of butter...onto a steak... (October:64).

The first three words consist of an imperative statement instructing the reader to 'order the steak', in complete opposition to the purported aim of reducing unhealthy fat. Rather than saying 'if you order the steak, order it plain', the choice of steak is taken as a presupposition, and other options, such as not ordering meat in the first place, are suppressed. The same applies in the following:

- ◆ Toss the garnish. Those harmless-looking shredded carrots that dress up your beef are probably deep fried...scrape them to the side. (October:64).

Even the health properties of vegetables are pressed into the service of promoting meat. The article 'Don't go Topless' describes the health properties of tomatoes, onions, mustard and red peppers, but the subtitle encourages readers to 'Make your burgers and dogs healthy – without turkey!' (September:60).

If meat without unhealthy butter glaze, meat with healthy ketchup, and fat reduced meat are promoted, so too is plain meat. For example, the straight imperative: 'Eat your booze: Marinate hot dogs, sausages or bratwurst in two parts whiskey and one part Tabasco sauce' (October:54).

By any standards, the promotion of red meat for men cannot be considered a health goal. But meat is, according to Adams (1990:34), 'a symbol and celebration of male dominance, "Real" men eat meat...failure of men to eat meat announces that they are not masculine' (ibid.:34). Fiddes (1991:146) writes that 'meat is almost ubiquitously put to use as a medium through which men express their 'natural' control, of women as well as animals'.

Beef is particularly symbolic of power since it comes from the largest and most muscular of farm animals. But it has another kind of symbolism too. Adam's (1990:26) theory is that meat, which consumes far more resources in its production than vegetables, is a luxury food which symbolizes class. If men are encouraged to eat a lot of meat, that places men collectively in a higher class than women.

### ***The ideal man: A beer drinker***

If beef is raised to almost legendary status among foods in *Men's Health*, then it is beer that is given this position among drinks. This can be seen from imperative statements such as:

- ◆ Fix every problem with beer (July/August, cover)
- ◆ Win! A Beer Vacation! (December, contents)
- ◆ Drink more beer (September:90)
- ◆ Win your weight in beer (July/August, contents)

Alcohol is a serious issue for men's health. While moderate alcohol has been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease, excess alcohol is 'one of the strongest contributors to men's excess morbidity and mortality from cardiovascular diseases...[and]...there is definitive evidence that excessive alcohol consumption can induce both cancer...and cirrhosis' (Courtenay 2000a:96). In addition, 'men's alcohol consumption also contributes heavily to their higher rates of both nonfatal and fatal injuries, particularly from motor vehicle crashes' (Courtenay 2000a:96). As for beer, according to Brewer (1995:280), 'most men tend to overestimate the strength of spirits and underestimate the strength of beer.'

The dangers of alcohol are, occasionally, mentioned in the magazine:

- ◆ Chronic liver disease...How to avoid dying: Quit your bottle-of-Chivas-a-day habit is a start. Can't do that? Then start drinking coffee – According to a Japanese study, 2-5 cups a day prevent[s] some liver damage. (October:84)
- ◆ There are three reasons men are less apt to crawl out of a wreck than women: We drive faster, we're less fond of seat belts, and we won't let a woman who's drunker than we are try to drive herself home (June:66)
- ◆ The average man has 1.2 alcoholic drinks per day. You can do better: *have two!* But stop at two; cirrhosis sounds more fun than it really is (June:62, emphasis in original)

The first of these is quick to propose additional coffee instead of reduced alcohol, the second blames women for men's drunk driving, and the third places the emphasis on 'have two!' drinks, rather than 'stop at two'. These are warnings about excess alcohol, but more frequent than the warnings are the positive images of alcohol, particularly beer. The praise is often explicit, as in the following (with emphasis added):

- ◆ Fix every problem with beer. 34 things you can do with *man's best beverage* (contents)...We always suspected it was *the greatest substance ever invented*. Now we have proof. (July/August:94)
- ◆ Win! A Beer Vacation! You. Beer. Europe. *What's not to love?* (December, contents)
- ◆ How beer may save your life, again!...Scientists think that soaking meat *in your favorite brew* for a few hours can prevent [carcinogenic compounds in charred meat] from forming...(July/August:92)

The presupposition in 'soaking meat in your favorite brew' is that beer is 'your favorite', treating 'if you are a man you love beer' as if it were a universal, common sense assumption. While already presuming the reader loves beer, the magazine encourages even more consumption by extolling the medical benefits of moderate alcohol more than the dangers of excess alcohol:

- ◆ Drink more beer – the hops may help keep calcium from accumulating in your kidneys (December, contents)
- ◆ Why you need more pizza and beer (November, contents)
- ◆ How beer may save your life (July/August:92)
- ◆ Booze that heals (June, cover)



- ◆ Drink for your health (June, contents)
- ◆ Drink to your health (June:112, red emphasis in original)

This encouragement is despite the fact that ‘Twice as many men drink above the recommended safe alcohol maximum than women’ (Brewer 1995:xiv). More subtle encouragement comes from ‘gratuitous beer’, beer which pops-up without a particular connection to the surrounding text:

- ◆ [Advice on flowers] Roses: red for love, white for eternity. Just like a Budweiser can. (December:80)
- ◆ Percentage of Americans who don’t tell their spouses that they received a raise: 39. THAT MEANS MORE MONEY FOR BEER! (September:50)
- ◆ 34 ways to seize the next 90 days: 1. Pitch horseshoes – beer in hand. (June:127)
- ◆ [about ice skating] Ideally the only ice we’d ever like to come in contact with would have the word Bud in front of it (November:33)
- ◆ You can buy [a gas-powered bar stool] for \$1,600. Or just buy 500 bottles of beer. (December:62)
- ◆ [about football] A football game is the only way we can get away with drinking beer at 9am (October:54)

Alcohol also appears in the list of ‘138 things a man should never apologize for’, which includes ‘getting drunk at the cookout’, ‘having a drink’, ‘having two drinks’, ‘having...oh, you get the idea’ (September:92)

The glorification of beer beyond its health benefits (in moderation) and despite its dangers (in excess) again goes beyond straightforward health goals, and relates to the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. According to Strate (1992), beer commercials provide a ‘manual on masculinity’. Drinking alcohol is ‘predominantly a male activity, where power and masculinity are directly related to an individual’s capacity for alcohol consumption.’ (Henry-Edwards and Pols 1991:26). This symbolic attachment of power to alcohol tolerance privileges men as a whole above women, who, for biological reasons such as lower average weight, have a lower tolerance for alcohol than men.

### ***The ideal man: A convenience food eater***

In a patriarchal society, cooking, at least in its unpaid domestic variety, is traditionally assigned to women. Fiddes (1991:158) writes that ‘it is the drudgery that is delegated to women; the exemplary prestige [of bringing home the bacon] still accrues to the man’. Hegemonic masculinity works to create an image of cooking as an inferior activity carried out by women, and of men who cook as effeminate. The only exception to this is men cooking meat on a barbecue (Fiddes 1991:157). The following extract from *Men’s Health* simultaneously dismisses ordinary cooking and promotes barbecue cooking:

- ◆ Cooking should be fun. And not fun in a seven-new-tips-for-baking-with-tarragon way. It should be fun in a dangerous way. Meaning it should require the starting of large, scary fires...abandon your self-cleaning oven...[and] watch your dinner go up in flames (July/August:86)

The associated recipes call for lamb loin, top London broil and ‘extra-lean’ sirloin steak, with the word ‘cook’ replaced by ‘char’ or ‘burn’ as in ‘How to burn it’ (July/August:92). The problem of the carcinogens in charred meat is solved by ‘soaking meat in your favorite brew’ (December:92). Barbecuing meat is even linked to sex:

- ◆ No woman can deny a man who knows how to serve a flaming meal. Once you light her fire, she’s going to light yours. (December 86).

In the extracts below, the image of conventional cooking is denigrated by mentioning and simultaneously dismissing three symbols of domestic cooking: herbs, aprons and ‘mom’:

- ◆ [Men] want it fast and easy...What we don’t want is some elaborate recipe that calls for coriander, which I think may be a type of candle (June:96)
- ◆ If there’s any reason...to wear a silly apron, preventing prostate cancer is it. (July/August:92)
- ◆ [Jimmy the bartender]: Nobody thinks I’m ridiculous – and I wear aprons (November:49)
- ◆ Remember when your mom used to make French toast on Saturday mornings? Try not to think about it. Instead think about thiamin and riboflavin [ingredients for good sex] (October:102)

This leaves a problem for men who cannot light ‘large, scary fires’ every day, but have nonetheless to feed themselves. The solution *Men’s Health* promotes is convenience food:

- ◆ A Man, A Plan, A Can: All you need is a can-opener (or a wife) (June:96).

‘A man, a can, a plan’, used in several issues, provides a particularly memorable rhyme connecting masculinity and convenience food. The equation is simple:

- ◆ You + a can opener = 12 manly meals (June, contents)

The promotion of convenience food in general is clearly not a health goal. Courtenay, in discussing the prevalence of heart disease among men, points out that ‘men...are more likely...to eat convenience foods that are high in fat’ (2000a:90). Brewer (1995:200) reports that ‘around 75 percent of dietary salt is hidden in processed foods including canned products, [and] ready-prepared meals...’. Sodium is ‘believed to be a primary contributor to high blood pressure and cardiovascular diseases such as stroke’ (Courtenay 2000a:91). The ‘A man, a plan, a can’ dishes contain up to 2319mg of sodium (June:96).

The encouragement of convenience food is taken to the extreme in the ‘Nuke your gut’ article:

- ◆ Nuke your gut. The TV dinner diet. Three minutes to a leaner waist. These dinners aren’t just easy to make, they’re a fast way to lose weight...low in calories and *incredibly* tasty. Fill your freezer with these 13 meals... (December:133)

Despite having up to 14g of fat per portion, the TV dinner diet is recommended for dieting because the portions are smaller than home-cooked meals. Alternatives, such as cooking smaller portions, or using lower calorie ingredients such as vegetables, are not mentioned. Not surprisingly, the meals feature beef, with six beef meals, four poultry, one seafood, a macaroni-cheese dinner and a four-cheese pizza.

Potter (1996:190) shows how, through ‘ontological gerrymandering’ it is possible to manipulate numbers to draw desired conclusions. The ‘Overweight? Liquidate’ article (November:122) uses numbers to make burgers, ice cream, and other convenience food appear to be diet food.

The article recommends a diet composed of foods that have a high water content and correspondingly low energy density. Foods with an energy density of 0 to 2.5 are ‘Wet food, eat as much as you want’ and foods with an ED of 2.6 to 6.0 are ‘Dry food, eat sparingly’ (November:122). The information, provided in the article and in the expanded list on the *Men’s Health* web-site, therefore encourages readers who want to lose weight to ‘eat as much as you want’ of:

- a) McDonald’s Egg McMuffin, b) meat loaf, c) pork chop, d) vanilla ice cream e) apple pie f) lasagna with meat, g) Wendy’s hamburger, h) Taco Bell Big Beef Burrito Supreme and i) Arby’s roast beef sandwich. (selected from November:123, and [www.menshealth.com](http://www.menshealth.com)).

Despite listing over 300 items, fresh fruit and vegetables (the ultimate low ED food) are almost completely missing, perhaps because the magazine calls this a list of ‘real food’ (November:122). Exactly what counts as a ‘dry’ food depends on the threshold set. Brewer’s (1995:225) categorization clearly uses a much lower threshold, since nearly all items in her ‘eat as much as you want’ category are fruits and vegetables. Brewer uses the relative energy densities of food to promote vegetables. *Men’s Health* uses the same system, but by setting the threshold just high enough to include burgers and ice-cream, and then simply not including vegetables in the list, promotes red meat and convenience food.

There seems to be a general gravitation towards high-fat, convenience foods in the magazine. The health benefits of zinc, for example, lead to a recommendation for ‘lean hamburger on wholemeal bun’ (October, 148) which becomes ‘Cheeseburgers that heal’ in the contents page. The health properties of tomatoes become ‘Why you need more pizza’ (November, contents). Fish oil translates to ‘pizza with anchovies’ (October:150), and medically altered potatoes become ‘Medicinal french fries’ (November:26). The magazine even publishes a letter recommending the ultimate convenience food: burger wedged between two slices of leftover pizza and microwaved (June:138).

*Men’s Health*, at the same time as promoting junk food, creates anxiety by setting up the goal of getting thin:

- ◆ ‘Eat fat, get thin’ (October, cover)
- ◆ ‘Still fat? We’ll fix that!’ (July/August, cover)
- ◆ ‘Nuke your gut’ (December, cover)
- ◆ ‘Fat to flat’ (September, cover).

This keeps the anxious reader buying the magazine, without helping him to make the shift towards cooking the kind of fresh, low fat, vegetarian food which could actually help him to get thin.

### ***The ideal man: A sexual champion***

*Men's Health*, as Haines (1998) points out, 'as with all men's magazines...is written as if all its readers were heterosexual'. If you want 'gold medal sex', the September issue advises, 'Grab a teammate (a wife or girlfriend will do)' and 'display your strength in the most important of all human arenas: the sexual one' (September, 81). Good quality heterosexual sex is another of the goals set up by the magazine:

- ◆ Sex so good the neighbors will complain (July/August, contents)
- ◆ Bigger Muscles! Better Sex! ( December, contents)
- ◆ Sex, Money, Muscle (June, contents)
- ◆ Don't ask why you're standing around in your boxer shorts making quiche: just remember your goal: sex (October 99)

The goal is not just quality sex, but 'tons of sex', with quantity also highlighted:

- ◆ Boil the *Men's Health* philosophy down to a few words and it's this: we don't want you to die. And, as long as you're alive, we also want you to...have tons of sex...(October:82)
- ◆ OD'd on sex? First, congratulate yourself. (December:58)
- ◆ To boost your tally: Date French, Italian, or Russian women...[they are] more likely to expect sex during the first week of dating (June:68)

Courtenay (2000a:101) reports that men are more likely to be sexually active, to have more sexual partners and to have sex under the influence of alcohol than women, and that the 'percentage of men at high risk for STD's is double that of women.' Every issue of *Men's Health* offers techniques for having 'great sex' (December:122), 'gold-medal performance' sex (September: contents), 'sex so good the neighbors will complain' (July/August, contents), but never (in the sample analyzed) 'safer sex'. In all instructions on the best ways to have sex, and in all the stories and descriptions of great sex, condoms are never mentioned, creating a positive image of unsafe sex.

Rather than establishing a sexual health goal, the majority of articles on sex seem to participate in what Ostermann and Keller-Cohen (1998) call 'heterosexist socialization', a central feature of hegemonic masculinity. The inverted commas and the pun on the word *camp* in the following extract border on homophobia, in an article defending the Boy Scouts:

- ◆ Camp out...on the web. The first openly gay Scout troop was formed by Scouts Canada...Don't miss the collection of camp songs in its "Educational Programs." (June:137)

The sexual goals set up by the magazine, such as 'reducing your partner to a quivering mass of sexual goo, using only your hands' (September:81), are high, and have the potential for the creation of a performance anxiety which keeps readers coming back to the magazine for tips.

### ***The ideal man: A television watcher***

Watching television is not an activity normally associated with health, but is pushed hard in the 'Why TV is good for you' article (June:83), which goes as far as saying 'TV is a great, great thing – a glowing fountain of endless possibilities' (June:84). 'Sitting inside and watching TV for hours on a beautiful day' is also one of the things a man 'should never apologize for' (September:90).

The 'Why TV is good for you' article recommends 30 different programs, only three of which ('Diagnosis murder', 'ER' and 'Chicago hope') have some kind of relation to medical topics. Some of the others are recommended because they make you laugh, relax, fall asleep, or, in the case of soap operas, because 'Studies show that devoting yourself to something other than yourself may extend your life-span.' (June:84). There is also a mixture of violence, pornography and sports programs.

Aside from the incidental health information given in the article, the reason for promoting television may be related to a different agenda. A content analysis of American television by Heintz-Knowles and Li-Vollmer found that:

messages and images remain strongly stereotypical...Men are expected to be leaders...they are characteristically violent and angry and, regardless of circumstances, they are not to cry...  
Heintz-Knowles and Li-Vollmer (1999)

These features are encouraged in the descriptions of the programs provided in the article. The extract below recommends watching hockey, and in doing so links testosterone (the symbol of masculinity) with violence, and encourages the repression of feelings:

- ◆ Hockey: When men watch violent programs, their testosterone levels go up...testosterone makes men feel good...that is why we fall silent when the hockey-brawl highlights come on...if we didn't have them we'd resort to more destructive behavior, like sharing our feelings (June:86)

Sports programming, as Messner et al (1999) point out, broadcasts the message that '...a real man is strong, tough, aggressive, and above all, a winner in what is still a man's world...'

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed several areas within *Men's Health* magazine which, while being tangential to health itself, seem to involve ideological agendas more closely related to the reproduction of male power and domination. The discourse of the magazine contributes to the attachment of symbolic importance to areas such as muscle size, alcohol tolerance, sports and violence, in which, due to biological factors, men have advantages over women. Eating red meat (the symbol of the hunter) is promoted, cooking (the symbol of unpaid domestic production) denigrated, good sex defined in terms of quantity of unsafe heterosexual sex, and television, with its stereotypes of masculinity, praised as a 'great, great thing'.

Although these areas were discussed individually, in the magazine they frequently appear as clusters, like the following extract which links masculinity, muscle, sex, meat, and alcohol:

'Meat has big advantages over all other foods: It packs muscle-building protein; supplies enough zinc to...keep your sexual machinery firing...it also goes down well with beer. In a race as close as the human one, that's enough to make it a winner. (December:166)

That is not to say that *Men's Health* does not contain useful health information. It does. An article in the July/August issue (p34), for example, describes what to do when calf muscles cramp up: useful advice, with a health goal and no particular political agenda. However, in a significant number of cases, the presentation of health goals simultaneously reinforces hegemonic masculinity and the unhealthy behavior associated with it. Lifestyle articles not specifically about health further contribute to this by directly encouraging unhealthy behavior. An example is the article about what to bring to the football game: 'Bring 2½ beers per hour per person...plan on two or three hot dogs, burgers or sausages per person' (October:54).

The magazine tells readers what they want to hear, at a time when hegemonic masculinity is being challenged by messages that red meat is harmful, excess alcohol is dangerous, convenience food is unhealthy, sexism is unacceptable, and animals have rights. And the reassuring advice, ostensibly backed up by the authority of science, comes from the mouth of a trusted buddy.

Testosterone, the ultimate symbol of masculinity, is sold hard: 'Better muscles! Better sex! Thicker hair! Get 'em all' the contents page (December) urges. But the extra hair will appear only on the face and body, two places the cover models shave. Boosting testosterone may have health benefits, but it is here that the real agenda of the magazine can be seen:

The more testosterone you have, the more dominant you're likely to be, and the less crap you'll take from pencil-necks who don't pack as much of the hormone under their shorts (December:100).

The accompanying pictures, 'from this' (a picture of a wimp) 'to this' (a gladiator in the heat of battle) (December:100), appear at a time when 'there is constant evidence that American men express significantly more aggression than American women' (Courtney 2000a:103). Encouraging men to increase their aggression might help them 'demand another 10 grand from your boss *or else*' (December:100), but this serves the goal of increasing male power rather than improving men's health. Like the other behaviors described in this paper, men's aggression 'contributes to their health risks and premature deaths' (Courtney 2000a:103).

Men, it seems, are doing something wrong. And the discourse of traditional masculinity is encouraging them to do so in the name of male power and privilege over women. Courtenay and Keeling (2000:243) write that 'the presence of men's health (and of a magazine bearing that name) on newsstands and television shows suggests the gradual development of a shared, public concept of men's health'. However, to truly address men's health needs, all participants in the creation of this concept will need to challenge the

discourse of hegemonic masculinity, and work towards the social construction of a new, healthier, form of masculinity.

#### Notes

1. All references to *Men's Health* magazine refer to the US edition of *Men's Health* in the year 2000. A citation such as (September:300) refers to the September 2000 edition, page 300.

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