

e.tv must stop running Christ Embassy's faith-healing adverts

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Media Statement

On 2 February 2011, the Advertising Standards Committee of the Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa (ASASA) issued a ruling in the very long-running complaint against Christ Embassy lodged by the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) in November 2009. The Committee found that a programme run at 7:30am on e.tv on Sunday mornings by Christ Embassy is:

- an advertisement as defined by ASASA's code,
- promotes faith as a means to cure illness or disease,
- promotes Christ Embassy as the place to seek this cure and
- violates ASASA's code because it offers a product to cure a disease for which it has not received Medicines Control Council registration.

Christ Embassy has been ordered to withdraw their advert. e.tv, who are legally bound to the ASASA code, must ensure the advert is withdrawn. The programme has run its course, but ASASA states that their ruling applies to any further such programmes or new contract to run such programmes. And indeed, Christ Embassy adverts continue to run on e.tv, including faith-healing claims.

The Southern African HIV Clinicians Society has sent this message which we wholly endorse:

South Africa's communities are devastated by HIV and every year hundreds of thousands more people develop advanced HIV requiring antiretrovirals. Many people after a diagnosis of HIV feel scared, isolated and desperate. Their poor physical health makes them more vulnerable. They need to hear a clear message that medical treatment with antiretrovirals together with therapies for complications of HIV, can restore health and wellbeing and add decades to their lives. Faith-based organisations can and do play an important role in supporting HIV-infected people in accessing and taking such treatments. However, organisations that offer miracle cures seek to mislead people that are sick and vulnerable down a path that often costs them their lives, and potentially leads to the infection of others. In times of epidemic, it is a public health imperative that information regarding prevention and treatment that is transmitted to the public is based on sound evidence and does not mislead.

This saga has been going on nearly 16 months, far too long to resolve an advertising complaint. We lodged a complaint against Christ Embassy on 22 November 2009. The particular advertisement in question claimed to use faith-healing to treat several diseases, including heart disease. But Christ Embassy has also run adverts on its website claiming to treat AIDS. The impetus for this complaint was a tragic report we received that a woman with XDR TB, who had made significant progress on her medical treatment, gave up her medicines because she believed Christ Embassy had cured her. She consequently became ill with XDR TB again and died but only after transmitting XDR TB to her children. Quackery of this nature is not merely misleading. It is life-destroying.

In June 2010, ASASA dismissed our complaint in what was a very poorly written ruling. We appealed and yesterday's ruling is the outcome of that appeal. We welcome the ASASA ruling. We retain our 100% success record with regard to our complaints lodged with ASASA. But ASASA needs to examine its mechanisms to ensure that complaints do not

take so long to resolve.

This excellent ASASA ruling establishes or reinforces two important principles:

1. Whether material is an advert is an objective test defined by the ASASA code and is independent of the medium in which the material appeared or the contract between the advertiser and the medium. Christ Embassy's argument that their programme was not an advert was dismissed.
2. The advert must be withdrawn because it violates appendix F of the advertising code, which prohibits offering products to treat the listed diseases. The ruling clarifies that the word *product* in appendix F of the advertising code is defined as including *goods, services, activities and facilities*. The ruling states that Christ Embassy was clearly offering a healing *service*.

We are particularly disappointed by e.tv in this saga. We alerted the broadcaster to our concerns on 22 November 2009. e.tv has previously exposed AIDS denialism as well as unethical behaviour by government and the private sector. Running these advertisements is inconsistent with an organisation that has advertised itself as having no fear and giving no favour. During the ASASA proceedings, the extent of the financial motive involved in running Christ Embassy's ads became abundantly clear: a broadcast agreement between Christ Embassy and e.tv shows that Christ Embassy paid R2.6 million excluding VAT to run 52 x 24 minute episodes.

In correspondence with TAC on 4 August 2010, e.tv wrote:

e.tv strictly adheres to the advertising standards and broadcast regulations by which we are governed and in the event that there is a ruling against any programme or advertisement by the BCCSA and ASA, e.tv will comply with such ruling. As yet, no such finding has been made against this advertorial.

We therefore trust e.tv will keep their word and cease running Christ Embassy's adverts.

Just two weeks ago, Christ Embassy's proprietor, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, claimed to heal a woman with breast tumours on e.tv. Christ Embassy has been in the news frequently for all the wrong reasons, facing accusations of fraud and of planting people in the audience to fake getting faith-healed. Even if only a fraction of the allegations being made against Christ Embassy are true, they paint a picture of an unsavoury organisation. The ASASA ruling confirms that this is an organisation that engages in unethical advertising. It is time for e.tv to cut its ties with this racket.

Finally, quackery is rife in South Africa. In the midst of our AIDS epidemic, this often has deadly consequences. The members of ASASA include all the major media outlets in the country. Yet many of them run adverts in obvious breach of the ASASA code, only withdrawing them once an adverse ruling has been issued. This is unacceptable and indicates that the self-regulation of advertising is currently not effective enough. We will not yet propose solutions to this problem; particularly at a time that the media is consistently under attack from anti-democratic forces and faces the spectre, admittedly lifted for the moment, of draconian legislation. But we call on ASASA and media outlets to take the initiative and address the problem. Lives of ordinary vulnerable people are put at risk from unethical advertising.

[Click here to view the ASA ruling.](#)

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