



“A breakdown in a man’s sexual equipment can be just as emotionally harrowing as a woman losing a breast

BETTINA ARNDT IN MY VIEW

WHY does our government treat male cancer victims so differently from women?

Women with breast cancer receive substantial government funding to help with the costs of rehabilitation.

Yet the 20,000 Australian men each year diagnosed with prostate cancer are given no funding for essential treatments necessary for their wellbeing. As far as the Government is concerned, the loss of a functioning penis simply doesn't rate compared to the loss of a breast.

When a woman has a mastectomy she receives government support for the costs of breast reconstruction. Losing a breast is a major blow to her femininity.

Naturally, surgery to restore her sexual confidence is considered a necessary part of her rehabilitation.

Breast reconstruction is available for free through the public system. In 2007-08 government expenditure on breast reconstruction was \$9 million, but this figure doesn't include the costs of the doctors' services nor the \$3 million for

Medicare claims related to private surgery.

From 2007, the Federal Government committed to spending \$31 million over five years for breast prostheses, providing reimbursements of up to \$400 for each new and replacement breast prosthesis.

It's wonderful that this money is finally available - women have lobbied hard to ensure women can afford this important aid to their recovery.

But the comparison with prostate cancer raises some disturbing questions. After skin cancer, prostate cancer is the next most common form of cancer in Australia.

The most recent (2006) figures show around 12,600 cases of breast cancer diagnosed each year, compared to 17,444 for prostate cancer.

Many of these men will undergo treatment for their cancer which leaves them impotent - dramatically affecting their sense of masculinity, their ability to enjoy their usual lovemaking and their relationship with their partners.

A permanent breakdown in men's sexual equipment can be just as emotionally harrowing as losing a

breast. So how is it that the Government ignores the plight of these men?

The history is interesting.

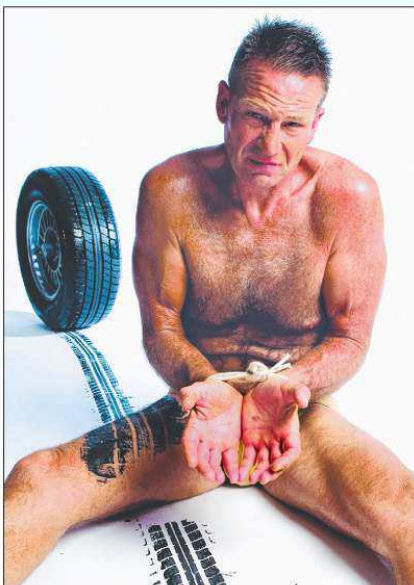
Caverject, an injection therapy, was subsidised through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) from 1996 until 2002, when an application was made by Pfizer asking for Viagra to be listed for use by men with erectile dysfunction (ED) due to prostate cancer treatment or other medical problems like diabetes, multiple sclerosis, Parkinsons and spinal cord injuries.

In 2002 the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee recommended that the drug be approved since Caverject was already listed, but warned of a potential blow-out in costs.

The Government's response was to take both drugs off the list.

Yes, governments are forced to make decisions on the basis of costs. But there are basic issues of equity here and men have every reason to feel shortchanged.

The lack of public protest is understandable. It takes a brave



DOING HIS BIT: Football commentator Sam Newman has posed for the E.J. Whitten Foundation Charity Calendar to raise money for prostate cancer.



man to speak out on men's right to an erect penis.

Many men taking part in research for my new book, *What Men Want*, complained that they simply can't afford treatment for their erection problems.

There's evidence suggesting that penile rehabilitation involving treatment soon after cancer surgery may reduce the risk of permanent ED. Yet many men can't afford to pay for this treatment.

ED drugs are expensive, averaging about \$9-10 per treatment.

Normal sexual functioning is not some frivolous lifestyle choice, like Botox or hair dye. Many men ex-

perience erectile failure as a devastating blow, which severely impacts their confidence, sense of masculinity and their relationships. Although there are women delighted that their men are forced to hang up their spurs, many wives greatly mourn the loss of this particular form of physical intimacy.

Sure there are problems in funding treatment for so many sufferers – but there's no logic to the differential treatment being offered to these two groups of cancer sufferers. How can male sexual needs be so cynically disregarded?

***What Men Want* is on sale from tomorrow. www.bettinaarndt.com.au.**

COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES

■ Most men are given no government support to help them with the costs of recovering from their own form of cancer, nor for the sexual consequences of other diseases.

■ There is a large population of men suffering erectile dysfunction – sometimes as a result of normal ageing processes but often as a result of disease.

■ We have the means to help most men in this situation with the wonderful new array of proven treatments now available.

■ Yet many miss out because they can't afford to pay these high costs, leaving them vulnerable to shonky companies offering widely advertised treatments with no proven effectiveness.