

Professionals' Media Advertising Does More Public Good Than Harm

THE current hassle over professional advertising involves a great deal more than ethical practices or money. Vital considerations include the public's right to be informed and the government's power to tell citizens what they may read.

Doctors, lawyers, opticians and perhaps other professionals have failed to develop suitable procedures for communicating with the public. This has given the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and self-appointed consumer spokesmen in Washington an opening they have wanted to regulate the issues mentioned.

Newspapers and other communications media have been remiss in commenting on this matter, because any support for advertising or public information might be regarded as self-serving.

The issues concerning freedom of the press and free enterprise are so important that they should outweigh reluctance on the part of the press and the public to consider these matters and where they might lead our nation.

Arguments that "professional ethics" make advertising undesirable do not stand up when doctors form unions or stage work slowdowns, in the manner of bricklayers, as is currently happening in California. The fact that many physicians disapprove of such tactics is a reason why they need to improve communications.

In this day of specialization and a mobile population, many people have difficulty in locating the right kind of doctor when they need one. Doctors should be permitted to inform the public of their specialties, locations and hours of availability.

Lawyers have debated the ethics of advertising and the American Bar Association is expected to discuss it again in February. James D. Fellers of Oklahoma City, ABA past president, has said they are watching to see how telephone directory advertising now allowed in California and New Mexico works out for lawyers specializing in workmen's compensation, taxation and criminal law.

Arguments by opticians and optometrists that quality of services and materials might be lowered if advertised, are without basis in fact. Advertising has kept department stores competitive, resulting in higher quality merchandise at better prices. The same is true of watches, hearing aids and other precision items.

Steps by FTC to control advertising are not new and FTC is not the only agency which is undertaking to do this. For example, the Oklahoma Corporation Commission unsuccessfully tried to muzzle public utilities three years ago by prohibiting advertising on unfounded claims that it resulted in higher energy costs.

Government regulations on advertising will not keep doctors, lawyers or politicians who are inclined to do so from misleading the public, and they will not keep crooks from cheating. Full freedom of the press and freedom to use the press will give honest people a chance to tell the public the truth. That is needed.