

## [Don't ban adverts for boob jobs](#) [1]

Written by [Dr Eamonn Butler](#) [2] | Tuesday 24 January 2012



In the wake of the fuss about some people being fitted with dodgy breast implants, the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (BAAPS) [wants advertisements for cosmetic surgery to be banned](#) [3] and 'cowboy' plastic surgeons regulated out of existence.

It's a bad idea. For a start, the faulty implants, made by the French company Poly Implant Protheses (PIP), were approved by the UK authorities when they were fitted, and many of them were fitted by NHS surgeons. It's not a 'cowboy' problem. And sadly, the call to ban 'cowboys' through regulation is the first resort of any interest group that feels its business threatened by competition. As Adam Smith knew 250 years ago, such appeals should be listened to "not only with the most scrupulous, but with the most suspicious attention".

Banning advertisements (for any good or service), meanwhile, robs the public of information. And people need information in order to make informed judgements about what they should choose. Many of us have spent hours on the internet, checking out the various features, quality and ratings of household appliances or cars or wristwatches. Shouldn't people be able to check out their surgeons? Advertisements convey useful information on just such decisions. Sure, you need to apply a bit of 'suspicious attention' to them: but in the UK at least, advertisements are required by law to be truthful.

It is actually rather difficult to draw a line between 'advertising' and 'information', because one of the main functions of advertising is to inform people ? to alert them to options that they might never otherwise have discovered. Not just goods and services that they might have been unaware of, but suppliers, options, quality and price information that they may not have known. The sort of information, in fact, that established 'insider' suppliers definitely do not want people to know because it represents a threat to their cosy monopoly. And monopoly is never in the public interest. As [Milton Friedman showed](#) [4] long ago, professionals' restrictions lead to higher prices and worse service.

Intellectuals and professional people invariably condemn advertising as crass and distasteful, with things like their 'limited time only' offers. Some surgeons have even expressed worry about 'buy one, get one free' offers with breast implants (which makes me wonder how many women would want a single, unless they had suffered mastectomy or some disfigurement). But such offers simply demonstrate that some suppliers have found ways to use up spare capacity in slack periods, or found ways to provide their service at half the cost of the establishment providers.

And is the 'advice' of the professionals, with their interest in keeping the business to themselves, any better or more reliable than the claims of advertisers, with their interest in breaking in to the market, and bound by the 'truth' condition as they are? Far fewer of us these days follow the advice of professionals without at least asking around, or checking things out on the web. And people do not make decisions on the strength

of an advertisement alone. The advertisement alerts them to the options, then they root out the information they need.

So we should not ban breast-implant advertisements on the basis of what the establishment professionals of the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons happen to think, any more than we should ban all those ads of cars racing round alpine bends on the grounds that the wise folk at the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders probably know what's best for us. We should let people discover all the options, and make up their own minds.

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