This is the unedited version of the Media Bites column which appeared in Australian Doctor in May 1999. The published version may have had minor changes.

Media Bites: Deep throat exposed

It's that time of the political year again. Mysterious stories have been appearing in the media about what the Federal Budget will bring (or will have brought by the time you read this). They don't actually quote anyone, at least not from Government, and they use vague terms like "it is understood that" or "sources say".

In other words, the fingerprints of politicians and their staff are all over such stories, but smudged a bit so they can't be traced straight back to source.

Politicians are masters at using one of the common tools of journalism - off the record comments or briefings - to their advantage. A classic example is leaking positive Budget initiatives which might otherwise be overlooked by the media on Budget night. Or floating stories about a $50 million funding cut, so that it doesn't look so bad when it turns out to be only $5 million. Or leaking a story which will ensure that a Ministerial colleague's plans are shot down in flames.

In previous years, this Government briefed select media in advance of announcements about the the therapeutic group premiums initiative in order to ensure industry groups were aware of its plans in advance (according to informed sources, at least).

The definition of "off the record" varies a bit depending who you talk to, but as a general rule means information provided which can be used in a story but not attributed to the source. Though journalists are meant to try to verify such information with other sources.

Or, if the information is seriously off the record, it is not meant to be published but is simply to inform the journalist. (Of course journalists are such terrible gossips that even if we agree to not publish something, that doesn't necessarily mean it won't be repeated.)

Actually, journalists' code of ethics (and yes, of course we have one) explicitly discourages use of "off the record". It says: "Aim to attribute

information to its source. Where a source seeks anonymity, do not agree without first considering the source's motives and any alternative attributable source. Where confidences are accepted, respect them in all circumstances."

But most journalists, myself included, readily admit to frequent use of the carrot approach. If your source won't tell you something, offer the enticement of "just tell me, off the record then."

Bill Royce is a leading doctor of spin. In his former job as press secretary for the Federal Health Minister, Dr Michael Wooldridge, he estimates that 95 per cent of his comments to journalists were "off the record". He says it is often "strategically wise" to not be quoted directly, and that it is useful when here may be legal reasons for not being quoted, or when you are under attack and want to create political difficulties for someone else but distance yourself from the information.

Sometimes, "you want to have the freedom to talk broadly without having to be word perfect", he adds. And when giving an individual journalist an "exclusive story" in advance of a Government announcement, it is wise not to be quoted as this will alienate other media contacts.

Clearly, this extensive use of "off the record" often suits both journalists and their sources. But is it in the best interests of media consumers if the sources of their information are not transparent?

In one sense it is, because otherwise the public would have access to far less information. Especially in these times when bureaucrats are pressured into political rather than public service and generally under strict instructions not to divulge information to the media. As is the case for doctors working in many public hospitals.

But in many ways, the media's reliance on "off the record" is to the detriment of its audience. Journalist Mark Ragg believes off the record comments are used too often by journalists to protect friends and regular sources, rather than to get the story. He cautions against placing too much faith in information which is not clearly sourced.

In an ideal world, politicians wouldn't lie and bureaucrats would be encouraged to tell the truth. If only journalists operated in an ideal world.