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Media Bites: Selling Breast Cancer

The breast is a wonder of form and function. It symbolises woman, beauty, motherhood, and, of course, sex appeal. It shouldn't be too surprising, perhaps, that breast cancer tends to dominate media coverage of health issues. Scarcely a week passes without it making the news - whether as research, a personal story, or yet another court case. Naturally, this is not simply a reflection of the power of the breast. It also says a lot about how the media works. Journalists speak of 'selling' their story to their news manager in an effort to get it placed in the newspaper or broadcast. At editorial conferences, the news managers then 'sell' the stories to the other power brokers. All the while, they are picturing which stories on page one, or at the top of the bulletin, will produce the most compelling and enticing product.

Journalists covering health issues soon learn which are the easiest to 'sell'. And breast cancer ranks high on the list. Bowel cancer does not. Nor, generally speaking, do stories about indigenous health, or good news. Debra Lee, the communications manager for the National Breast Cancer Centre (NBCC), has previously worked for the RACGP and other health groups. "Selling" breast cancer stories to the media is a breeze compared with those about childhood immunisation or other important health issues, she says.

That was also my experience when covering clinical and research issues at *The Sydney Morning Herald*. During four years there, I wrote 1,184 stories, of which: 124 mentioned breast cancer; 16 mentioned bowel cancer; 48 mentioned diabetes; 117 mentioned heart disease; and 18 mentioned Aboriginal health. This is not the complete picture of the paper's coverage as others also wrote about health and indigenous issues.

Even so, I wouldn't use my record to argue that the media accurately reflects health priorities. Not that I'd try to argue that anyway; with its imperatives to present the new, the sensational and the whacky, the media can hardly claim to provide other than a distorted reflection of society.

So why has breast cancer become so newsworthy in recent years? It's partly due to the celebrity factor. Annita Keating's support helped put it on the media map locally, while the personal experiences of women

such as Linda McCartney and Olivia Newton John have helped bring it into the limelight. The rise of the consumer health movement has also been important, as has the establishment of the NBCC.

Health professionals working in the area also argue that there have been better grounds to publicise breast cancer than other diseases because there has been better evidence - for example to support formal screening programs, or various approaches to treatment.

“Other diseases will start to get a better share of the media as they get a better evidence base,” comments a Sydney oncologist, Dr Fran Boyle.

None of this is intended to belittle the importance of breast cancer or underestimate the suffering it causes. The first national breast cancer conference for women, held in Canberra in October, was repeatedly reminded of the need to improve treatment, support and information.

Another reason that breast cancer has been a ‘good’ story is that it has often been poorly managed. “But it’s hard to believe that breast cancer is worse managed than other diseases,” comments the NBCC’s director, Professor Sally Redman. “What differs is that people may be more willing to tell their stories.”

A high media profile may be useful for raising funds or wielding political clout, but it can also cost. An analysis of newspaper and magazine coverage of breast cancer in 1995, done by University of Sydney researcher Erin Shiel for the NBCC, found most contained little useful information. The stories were likely to make women fearful, although this is not generally considered an effective strategy in health promotion circles. And the coverage mostly featured young women, giving the impression that they are greatest risk. So it’s not surprising that many young women overestimate their risk. Ms Sally Crossing, chair of the Breast Cancer Action Group NSW, is also critical: “A lot of coverage which worries and frightens women doesn’t inform them about the actual risks.”

But scary headlines sell newspapers.