

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

Media Bites: Love Thyself

One of my more forthright medical contacts recently went to some trouble to explain just how much doctors despise journalists. This reminded me of something which has often occurred to me: that medicine and journalism have more in common than many might like to imagine. Here's a summary of our shared ground (aka why doctors should be nicer to journalists).

1. The impossible dream

Doctors and journalists tend to pride themselves on their professional independence. The sad thing about ideals is that they so often go unmet. Doctors complain day and night about interference by bureaucrats or other groups. Journalists also love to complain about the constraints on their work, such as managers who dictate how stories should be covered, and commercial or other pressures.

2. Mistakes are not acknowledged as often as they should be.

Of course we all make mistakes. It's inevitable when you work under pressure, with not enough time as we'd like to research stories or patients, and when the facts of life can be so uncertain. Especially when we don't always have control over what happens to the story or the patient. Getting a newspaper to run a correction can be tougher than getting a health minister to admit hospitals kill more people than they should.

3. Specialists rule

Journalism has been revolutionised by the trend towards specialist reporters, such as those who cover politics, science or health. As with medicine, it's a reflection of the increasing complexity of knowledge and society. For patients and media consumers, specialisation has its good and bad points. The blinkered view can sometimes miss the bigger picture.

4. Ego is not a dirty word

At a recent workshop attended by illustrious medical types (college presidents and so on), some of the more irreverent delegates whispered

a lot about FIGJAM - or F* I'm Good, Just Ask Me! Possibly the only place where FIGJAM would be in even more plentiful supply is a room full of journalists.

5. We search for truth

That access to knowledge and information is so closely allied with power is just a coincidence. Anyway, everyone knows that truth is a rare commodity. We might start off looking for it, or believing in it, but it's easy to get lost, distracted or confused along the way. And none of us are as objective as we think we are.

6. Rich and powerful

Doctors are wooed by the rich and powerful, namely the pharmaceutical industry. Journalists have only gained a name as long lunchers (not that there ever seems to be time these days) because so many vested interests are willing to shout us. We could open a shop with the amount of free junk sent to us by public relations companies and their clients. Naturally, no doctor or journalist would ever be seduced by such blatant bribes.

7. Grrl Power

OK, so there's far more women working as doctors and journalists these days. But there's not nearly so many women running newspapers, TV stations or becoming surgeons. (Australian Doctor is exceptional in having a female editor). Many workplaces, whether medical or media, retain big roadblocks to female advancement.

8. Word-lust

I'm not sure that many journalists are frustrated doctors, but there's a hell of a lot of doctors who are frustrated writers, judging by the number of books, newspaper articles, and other such publications they pump out.

9. Socialised

We are all socialised by our professional training and practice. What might seem perfectly reasonably behaviour to a journalist might appear intrusive or insensitive by another's standards. Similarly, practices which may be routine to a medico may seem threatening or uncaring to a patient.

10. Generalisations are silly

You show me a thoughtless, irresponsible journalist and I'll show you another who cares deeply about their work. There are the good, bad and indifferent in every trade. Some are there for the money and prestige, some because they want to make a difference, others because it's what they do best. Some are born into it; others fall into it by chance. It's a pretty fair bet, though, that there's a competitive streak in most journalists and doctors.