

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

### **Media Bites: Does the public trust doctors too much?**

Experts have been copping a hiding lately. The authority of medical opinion has been challenged by the new gods of RCTs and evidence-based medicine. Even the justice system is starting to distinguish between opinion and evidence, with civil courts in England and Wales recently announcing tougher processes for expert witnesses.

But medical opinion remains relatively unquestioned in at least one powerful area of society, the media. Much as doctors like to complain that the media gives them a hard time, the evidence suggests otherwise. When you consider that the role of the media, in theory at least, is to scrutinise and question, doctors don't get too rough a deal. At least not compared to politicians, lawyers, cops and robbers.

When doctors speak to the media, they are unlikely to face the tough questions which are routinely dished up to other powerful professional groups. It seems to be assumed that doctors only speak truth, especially when discussing clinical or scientific issues. Of course, most doctors dealing with the media are speaking what they see as the truth. But we all know that truth is a many-headed beast. Just reporting one doctor's version is unlikely to present the fullest picture of the truth (and journalists should aim, according to Watergate-buster Carl Bernstein, for "the best obtainable version of the truth".)

So what's the evidence for this opinion? It may not be as sophisticated as a controlled trial (though many studies of media coverage of health issues show that doctors have the dominant voice). But what follows is a pretty powerful case study.

A few months back, many journalists received glossy media kits announcing the launch of a \$1.4 million CT scanner at the Sydney Heart Image Centre, Sydney Adventist Hospital. We were also invited to undergo a free scan, with the promise that it would tell whether we were at risk of heart disease by identifying calcium deposits in our coronary arteries.

Well, the media went wild. The “revolutionary test” was splashed across radio, TV and print. There were also favourable write ups in some medical publications. Most reports quoted only the cardiologists involved in the centre (which is now, not surprisingly, booked out for months).

But few journalists seem to have asked about the evidence for the Centre’s claims - which are regarded as extravagant by the Cardiac Society of Australia and New Zealand, which says the test’s role in screening asymptomatic people is unproven. A recent study, published in *Circulation*, involved 1196 asymptomatic, high-risk patients who were followed up for 41 months after undergoing a CT scan. The scan was no more effective than conventional risk factor analysis at predicting future risk. Meanwhile, calculations by Dr Greg Nelson - one of many cardiologists whose patients have been asking about the new test - suggest that it has such a high rate of false positives that the cost of preventing one death per year in a screening program could reach \$1.5 million.

Media coverage scarcely mentioned the question of the Centre’s vested interest in promoting its new service. The notable exception to such concerns was a rigorous report by ABC Radio’s Dr Norman Swan (transcript at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/helthrpt/stories/s24715.htm>)

Associate Professor David Celermajer, who has raised concerns about the test’s promotion on behalf of the Cardiac Society, has been stunned by the media’s unquestioning coverage. In such situations, journalists should ask about conflicts of interest and the published scientific evidence, he says.

Even Dr Ross Walker, the cardiologist who has been widely quoted promoting the test, is surprised by the amount of supportive coverage. “Our publicist was very successful, probably more successful than I would have liked,” he says. “We just got such good coverage that my colleagues were upset by it, and probably reasonably so.”

Perhaps this case study is as much a comment on the pervasive belief that new technology equals better technology as it is a comment on the media’s tendency for unquestioning acceptance of medical opinion. Either way, it’s a good argument for injecting some of the tenets of evidence-based medicine into journalism.

