

This is the unedited version of the Media Bites column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in December 2000. The published version may have had minor changes.

### **Media Bites: FIRST, THE GOOD NEWS...**

A lot of people had a lot of butterflies when they tuned into ABC TV's 4 Corners several weeks ago. Some were nervous because their most intimate thoughts and fears were about to be broadcast for all to see on national television.

Others were nervous because the program, dealing with the difficulties faced by many cancer survivors in adjusting to their changed situation, was about their research. Not only were their findings about to be put to a very public test, but they felt a responsibility that the survivors appearing on the show might be burnt by the experience.

The telephone calls and emails started to flood in before the show had even finished. By midnight, the ABC had received more than 700 emails. Typical were these comments from Marie: "It is good to see that I am not alone", and from Carol: "It's really helpful to have one's own problems recognised, especially when there is a feeling that you should just be grateful and get on with your life".

The journalist and the producer who worked on the program, Wendy Page and Morag Ramsay, were overwhelmed by the feedback. "I have never had such a big response to a story before," says Ramsay.

But it is perhaps a sign of the cynicism with which most people regard the media these days that the most common comment the researchers heard from colleagues at the University of Sydney was: what great publicity for the University and that it should help attract funding.

Chris Jordens, a researcher who has been involved in the study of survival issues by the University's Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine (CVELIM), thinks this response missed the point.

The point being, he argues, that the program actually did a lot of public good by encouraging discussion of issues which are not usually discussed. His analysis of the email responses showed it struck a chord

with many - including those who have survived other life-threatening events, such as heart attacks and crime.

“Academia and the media always have this relationship where one is trying to use the other...but in this instance the major benefit went to a third group, the survivors,” he says.

Wendy Page believes the story is the most significant she has done in her 15 years in journalism in terms of its impact on the public good. “It has made a lot of difference for a lot of people,” she says.

Encouraged by the response to the report, Jordens and co now plan to establish a group for cancer survivors and their carers which will aim to provide information, to influence health policy, education and research, and to work against discrimination against survivors.

It's nice to hear a good news story about the media for a change - because there aren't many about. A lot of criticism comes from vested interests, people who don't like the media because they don't like what it is saying about them or theirs.

But when someone like Eric Beecher - a former Sydney Morning Herald editor and now chief executive of Text Media, which launched the now-defunct The Eye magazine - is critical, even journalists take note.

Beecher recently delivered the Media Lecture which is held each year to commemorate former ABC broadcaster Andrew Olle. Afterwards, it seemed that most of the audience - apart from ABC boss Jonathan Shier - was nodding agreement with his criticisms.

In a nutshell, these were that: commercialism, rather than idealism, has become the driving force behind journalism and public broadcasting; that the internet revolution is unlikely to foster quality journalism; and that the growing influence of the PR industry is undermining journalism.

“The idea that owners of media organisations regard the practice of journalism as a public service is as outdated as the idea that businesses operate in the interests of a better world,” said Beecher.

Like all effective speakers, Beecher ended on a positive note, arguing that there will always be a future for quality journalism - because there is

a market for it. Just goes to show that the news about journalism is not all bad.

\* Transcripts of the 4 Corners program and Beecher's speech are available by searching the ABC's website at [www.abc.net.au](http://www.abc.net.au)