

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

## **Media Bites: THE MISSING STORIES**

Call me contrary or perhaps even perverse, but when a big story hits the news, it often makes me wonder about the stories which are not being told.

In recent days, there have been many reports of a terribly sad traffic accident outside a primary school at Bulli in NSW. It is alleged that a 79 year-old-woman drove through a red traffic light and collected two young girls on a pedestrian crossing on their way to school. One died and the other suffered serious injuries.

The media focus has been on the Roads and Traffic Authority which had not responded to more than a decade's campaigning by the local community to move the lights and make the crossing safer.

Understandably, many people have been upset by the cost of the dangerous road to the two girls, their families, and the community. What I can't help wondering about is the effect on the elderly woman. What an awful burden to gain so late in life. How will she live with it? What sort of support is she receiving?

At a relaxed family lunch one Sunday some months ago, I learnt that distant relatives had been involved in a widely publicised accident with a Famous Person. I had not realised this from any of the media reports because they focused entirely on the Famous Person's injuries and story.

The relatives were not named in any of the reports that I saw, even though the accident was not their fault and they suffered quite serious physical and emotional consequences themselves. But their story did not seem to count. Indeed, the accident would never have raised a headline, except perhaps in their local paper, if a Famous Person had not been involved.

When hospital bed shortages hit the headlines each winter, there are always other stories which are not being told. The stories about how

difficult it can be for the mentally ill and their families to gain access to appropriate services and care (the two are not necessarily synonymous). The stories which patients tell about what is wrong with the health system or what is important about their health are often quite different to those told by doctors. Just like other doctors and health professionals might have quite a different view from hospital specialists about how to spend health dollars. But it is so often the specialists' stories which are told.

Another common headline at the moment concerns the unravelling of the human genome. A triumph for science and technology. There are great and fearless predictions of what this will mean for our health and future: preventing and curing all manner of diseases. The stories about what it might mean for the starving and impoverished who inhabit so much of this planet are not quite so prevalent.

We hear a lot about the terrible statistics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. These stories are often told by the authors of government or research reports; less often are they told by the people themselves. Even less often are the people given media space to tell about the good things their communities are doing for themselves.

It is sometimes said that the media has become the tool of powerful lobby groups, and that one of the reasons there is such public cynicism about the media is that it is more likely to tell the story you want told if you can afford expensive public relations campaigns. It is also said that this is one of the perceived attractions of the internet where it is much easier for every Jo Blow to have her say.

This probably all sounds like a huge whinge. It is not meant exactly like that. Sometimes it is not appropriate to tell every story - I would hate to be the journalist sent to knock on the door of the elderly driver involved in the recent accident. Sometimes it is just not possible to uncover every story in the mad race of media deadlines.

And most people are far more likely to be drawn to the exceptional yarn about the man who bites dog than the more everyday version.

But it doesn't hurt any of us to sit back and wonder sometimes about the stories that we haven't heard. And why we haven't heard them. And whether we should have.

