

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

Media Bites: Journalistic heavyweight under the spotlight

When Tim Johnson speaks, a lot of people listen. For more than 15 years, Johnson has been the medical reporter for ABC television in the United States. His news and feature reports attract up to 20 million viewers at a time.

Johnson initially trained and worked as an emergency medicine specialist. When he moved into full time media work, he decided that his medical training was not sufficient for the new job, and then undertook a masters in public health.

At ABC, he is backed by the sort of resources that medical journalists in Australia could only dream of; at any one time, he has four or five producers working on projects, as well as access to a team dedicated to researching health and medicine.

In 1998, he delivered the annual Shattuck address to the Massachusetts Medical Society, which was then published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

So Johnson is no light weight in the field of medical journalism. But even he must have been a touch nervous when he fronted up to address a recent conference on medicine and media, hosted by the Swedish Society of Medicine in Stockholm.

Many speakers - both journalists and academics - had been stressing the need to improve medical reporting, to present a more balanced picture of potential benefits and harms, and to pay more attention to the vested interests involved in research.

And then Johnson took the stage, to show one of his pieces for prime time TV. He explained that he had not done the story lightly, recognising that it was based on evidence which many would consider too preliminary to influence public health behaviours.

But he had finally gone ahead because the story had begun to appear in the print media - and because he had the “visuals” to illustrate it (as we all know, a story is not a story in TV-land without these).

Johnson’s piece began with an emotional interview with the wife of a middle-aged man who had died suddenly of a heart attack. It then explored an emerging hypothesis that statins may have a beneficial role in preventing sudden cardiac death for reasons other than their well established effects on cholesterol.

The report quoted cardiologists saying that statins seem to stabilise plaque in the walls of coronary arteries. Johnson concluded that while medicine was still in the early stages of understanding the issue, he had been sufficiently convinced at age 64 to start taking the statins himself. He also gave several brandnames.

You can imagine the impact of a report like this - it would have sent many nervous middle-agers rushing to their doctors, and statin manufacturers rubbing their hands all the way to the bank.

Johnson told the conference that he knew the story had been going out on a limb, but he felt if the evidence was sufficient to persuade him to take an action, that he had an obligation to share that with his audience. He added that every cardiologist he knew over 60 was doing the same as him.

Liselotte Hoejgaard, editor of the Journal of the Danish Medical Association, was quick to reach the microphone to congratulate Johnson for his courage in showing the report at such a forum. She added that she thought it “awful”.

Such a report highlights many conflicting perspectives about how the media should cover medical developments. It also highlights the many conflicting perspectives about how medicine should be practised - was it right for the cardiologists quoted to promote widespread use of expensive medications, with potential for side effects, on the basis of what many consider only circumstantial evidence?

The Heart Foundation’s Andrew Tonkin certainly thinks their comments way premature due to the lack of evidence from clinical trials. But that sort of balancing comment was noticeably absent from the piece.

Perhaps the one thing that most observers might agree upon - regardless of whether you think it sensible or foolish to expect the media to cover only developments that have been published in peer-reviewed journals - is that we all need to find better ways of acknowledging when there is uncertainty about what we are telling people.