

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

Media Bites: The powerful letter

Does the name Stan Stanfield ring a bell? One of the most prolific writers around on health, he has been published in Newsweek, The Australian, The Bulletin, Time magazine and the Sydney Morning Herald, to name just some of his outlets. After many years of reading his work, I was intrigued to learn more about Stanfield, 66, over a recent cup of coffee.

He brought along a stack of his publications as well as some of his favourite health literature, which was a bit hard to read as it had been so heavily underlined. Speaking quickly and intently, he explained why he is so passionate about spreading the word about the dangers of fluoridation, vaccination, and many practices of modern medicine. Another favourite topic is that hormonal imbalances during pregnancy are responsible for many of what he calls “gender imbalances”, such as homosexuality.

Regardless of what you think of Stanfield’s fiercely held beliefs, he illustrates a very good point about letters to the editor pages. They are noticed; in fact some people think they are the best read parts of newspapers and magazines. And because they are probably one of the more democratic parts of the media, all sorts of views can and do pop up.

Geraldine Walsh edited the Sydney Morning Herald letters page from 1990 to 1998. In an interview on ABC Radio’s The Media Report, she reminisced about the days before faxes and e-mail. When public holidays were impending, she would hoard timeless letters to use when the postal service was out of action.

She says widespread access to faxes and email has given letters pages a new lease of life; not only can people respond immediately to issues of the day, there seems to be a new breed of letter writer.

“It was evident when I arrived in the job that the Letters writers and presumably the readership of The Herald itself, was aging fast,” she

said. "As one after another Herald letter-writer of long standing died at a ripe old age, I began to fear they'd all die out. At first, the fax introduced middle-aged business people writing from their offices. Later it spread to the home and even busy housewives could rattle off a thought or two in a spare moment.

"However it is e-mail which is a saviour. It has delivered to Letters that previously elusive object: the young reader. The Herald, like all newspapers, is desperate to attract the young reader, and in my view Letters is one of the few areas which can be a magnet for them."

It sounds like Jim Buckell enjoys his job - at least it makes him laugh regularly. Each day, he reads every letter sent to The Australian. Some days, that means 400 letters. More often, there are about 200. Of those, he selects, edits and lays out between 13 and 28.

The answer to the question he's always asked is: write about something topical; have something new and fresh to say; say it succinctly and with "some degree of wit or humour or polished writing."

Writers who just want to have a whinge about the incumbent Government are the bane of all Letters editors, he says.

So it's perhaps not surprising that Stanfield has been such a success - he generally writes just a few paragraphs which finds some link, however tenuous, between a recent story and one of his recurrent themes. He estimates that 10 per cent of his letters are published, which is more impressive than it might sound when you consider how many he writes.

It's perhaps also not surprising that Stanfield is big on conspiracy theories; he is convinced that some newspapers have a policy of not publishing letters on certain subjects.

Buckell doesn't give this theory much credence. "I've never been issued with any directives," he says. "The editor once said, if you run poetry you will get a flood of poets so I've always kept that in mind."

So there you have it - if you want a public voice, avoid poetry and master the art of snappy prose.

