

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

### **Media Bites: THE ONLY STORY IN TOWN?**

The folk who have spent years and millions of dollars developing media facilities for the Sydney Olympics recently invited stickybeaks to have a squizz at their work. They also unveiled a rather dizzying selection of statistics.

The Main Press Centre, which will have 3,000 staff during the Games, boasts 1,500 pigeon holes, 2,000 phone lines, 3,614 chairs, and one prayer room. It also has the world's largest photographic laboratory, and plans to serve 320,000 litres of beer to thirsty journalists.

Altogether, 5,500 journalists and photographers are accredited to cover the Games, and more than 10,000 broadcasters are also expected. Many others will also hit Sydney town for what has become the world's biggest media event.

In other words, there will be far more competitors in the media marathon than in the more traditional sporting events.

Not that anyone who's come within cooee of a newspaper in recent years should be surprised by the notion that the Games are about much more than simply sport. They are also about TV audiences stretching into the billions, newspapers putting out editions around-the-clock, and the insatiable appetite of the Net.

A wander around the Main Press Centre is a powerful reminder of just how many of the world's eyes will be watching. Bright yellow signs advertise the offices of the Austrian Press Agency, Newsweek, New York Times, Nordic News Agency Group, the People's Daily from China, and so on.

The logistics of catering for such a huge contingent are staggering. The media and others in the "Olympic Family" will have their own news service which will provide, via intranet, immediate coverage of results, press conference highlights, and biographies of the 10,300 competitors.

Stephen Dettre, editor-in-chief of the Olympics News Service, which will have 480 staff during the Games, says the number of journalists covering the Olympics has doubled since he covered his first Games, as an AAP reporter, in 1988.

He blames the internet for the growing demand for immediate information.

“It’s impossible for any one media organisation to cover the Games totally by themselves because it’s become so big,” Dettre says. “This is the biggest world media event. Even the Papal tour doesn’t get this sort of thing. It’s monstrous, and it’s only going to get worse because of the demands for information with the internet.”

Former Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen used to describe press conferences as “feeding the chooks”. Some might see an irony in the location of the Main Press Centre: at other times, its buildings house cattle and horses attending the Sydney Show.

Overseas journalists have already begun scratching for stories other than the Games.

One Sydney health organisation was contacted by Korean television looking for story leads. The conversation went something like this:

*We hear Sydney has a high number of gay and lesbian people?*

**You mean Korean gay and lesbian people?**

*No, we want to see normal gay and lesbians. Can you show us some?*

*We would*

*like to film. Also, do you also know about men who wear nappies who are slapped by women?*

The more common requests often reveal our visitors’ preoccupation with a dangerous outdoors. Scott Crebbin, a media advisor to the Olympics, has spent much time putting out media fires about sharks. Fears that sharks would attack triathletes during their Sydney Harbour swim have been a “huge story around the world”, he says. “It went so far that we had to commission a report just to find out what the likelihood of it happening was. It said the chance of a shark attack in September is almost zero.”

Perhaps the international interest in our wild outdoors is not so surprising when you consider the images which usually feature in

tourism campaigns. The glossy, glamorous photos at the Main Press Centre are no different - they show a country of clean, sweeping horizons, glowing Aboriginal children, and ruggedly healthy bushies. It is a place which seems rather remote from the real world as many of us know it.

Apart from everything else, the coverage of the Sydney Games may prove a reminder that how we see ourselves is often quite different from how we are perceived by others.