

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

Media Bites: SURVIVING THE MEDIA STING

It was one of those stories that everyone was talking about, as so often happens when freakish events result in tragedy. Journalists began ringing the hospital for information even before the arrival of the little girl who had been badly stung by the same swarm of bees which had attacked and killed her mother.

The next several days were frantic for Dr Alyson Kakakios, the head of immunology at the New Children's Hospital in Sydney. On top of trying to look after her high-profile patient and the family, as well as her usual duties, there was a stream of requests for media interviews.

In the hours after the infant arrived late one Thursday afternoon, Kakakios did two interviews with print media and one with TV. Over the next four days, there were another 9 TV, five radio and 15 print interviews. Many more were declined, simply due to lack of time.

Kakakios, who had not been involved in such a media frenzy before, found it an overwhelming experience which intruded on her professional and personal life. She had to ask colleagues to attend to one of her clinics, and stayed at the hospital until very late each night to try to catch up with her work.

Sometimes she cringed at how her comments were reported, and she also copped some light-hearted flak from colleagues about her instant media profile.

But Kakakios says she felt under an obligation to provide the media with information: "I think any doctor working in a place such as this does feel some responsibility, both to the hospital and the people who support the hospital in the community and who are very interested in what's happening."

Gilly Paxton, the hospital's public relations manager, estimates there were more than 30 print stories, over 20 radio spots and about 10 TV stories during the week. She argues that the hospital has an obligation

to respond to media interest in such stories, despite the strain it can put on staff and resources.

“We rely on the media to promote the hospital... to present to the general public all of the positive things in the hospital such as advances in research and treatment,” says Paxton. “And we’re certainly dependent on the good will of the community for donations.”

Her other point - that if you don’t provide the media with accurate information, you can’t complain if they come up with dodgy goods - is well taken by Tony Nocera, an emergency physician with the CareFlight helicopter rescue service, who recently wrote an article for the *Medical Journal of Australia* called “Disasters, the media and doctors”.

Nocera, who is undertaking a masters degree in hospital disaster planning, believes disaster planning often pays insufficient attention to the likely impact of the media, and to ensuring its needs for information are met around the clock. “I remember going to a course on disaster management, and the organiser was asked about the media,” Nocera says. “He said, ‘they can be a problem’. And that was it.”

Nocera has plenty examples of the bad - and good - of media reporting of disasters. In Britain, a photographer disguised himself as a doctor so he could take photos of accident victims, while a journalist dressed in theatre garb to gain access to victims of the Oklahoma bombing (these are not acceptable tactics under Australian journalists’ code of ethics).

On the positive side, the media can be used to relay important information, to the broader community as well as health workers. “After the Atlanta bombing, the chief surgeon saw the bombing at home on TV and rang the hospital and activated the disaster plan,” says Nocera. “In some cases, the first notification of an incident has been the media ringing up to find out about it.”

The days are long since gone when health services and professionals could get away with trying to ignore the media and its exhaustive demands. For many, media relations has become part of the job.

Looking back on her recent experiences, Kakakios has this simple advice for others who may be called upon to feed the media beast: “It always takes much more time than you think it’s going to take. To avoid

getting very upset, frustrated, delayed and anxious, you need to recognise that.”