

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

Media Bites: GETTING INTO TRAINING

Are you a doctor? I've been asked that more times than I can remember when doing interviews for health stories. Sometimes the motivation is sensible; the interviewee is simply trying to work out how to phrase their language appropriately.

But sometimes there is an underlying suggestion, how could anyone who is not a doctor possibly write about medicine?

The answer that I am usually too polite to bat back is, would you want only politicians writing about politics, or sports-stars writing about match-fixing?

That said, some of the finest health journalists are doctors. And some are not. A medical education confers a particular type of knowledge and way of looking at the world. This does not automatically include the ability to stand back from the field and examine it critically from another perspective. Or that gut-feeling which says, this is a story.

There is growing recognition, however, of the value of some specialist training for journalists who cover health and medicine.

Associate Professor Carl Sundberg, of Sweden's Karolinska Institute, is medically trained and spends half his time doing fundamental physiology research, in particular examining gene expression in human skeletal muscles following physical activity.

The rest of his time is mostly devoted to running courses which teach journalists about medicine, or which teach journalism and communication to undergraduates and postgraduates in science, medicine and related fields.

Sundberg met with several medical journalists during a recent visit to Australia to investigate problem-based learning at Newcastle University. He first developed an interest in communication while working as a

guide to scientific exhibitions at the Museum of Natural History in Stockholm.

Thanks to a scholarship from the Swedish Medical Research Council, he has also spent time “on the inside”, writing health stories for a Swedish daily newspaper, and going on the road with a high-profile television health reporter in the United States, Dr Tim Johnson.

What he observed would not surprise most health journalists - the pressure of deadlines, the tendency for the same journals and “experts” to be used as sources for stories; the relatively low status of health reporting within the media industry; and how decisions about whether or how a story will run can have more to do with the clout of the individual journalist than the merits of the story itself.

Sundberg argues there is a paradox within the media’s attitudes to health. On the one hand, editors often refuse to run worthwhile stories because they are “too complex”, and yet will send inexperienced staff to cover complicated health stories.

“Editors are uneducated about the biomedical field,” Sundberg says. “Also, I don’t think they are aware enough about what really concerns the public.”

Of course, I love to quote him saying that because it is what I have been telling media managers for years. Unfortunately, so many seem to ignore surveys which consistently put health and medicine at the top of the list of what people want to read about.

Sundberg is organising a conference on medicine and the media, to be held in Stockholm later in the year - more details are at: <http://www.svls.se/media.html>.

Professor Peter Brooks, executive dean of health sciences at the University of Queensland, has also recognised that there is a niche for medical journalism courses, and the University has recently established a postgraduate diploma in medical journalism.

Professor John Henningham, the head of the University’s journalism department, says the course, also available through external studies, is

aimed at journalists, health professionals and those with no experience in either field.

He expects the media will become more likely to invest in specialist health and medical reporters as the aging babyboomer generation focuses on health issues.

It can't be a bad thing if courses like his help journalists and others to expand their horizons and improve their skills in critical analysis. Who knows, it might eventually even influence the attitudes of those who wield the greatest influence over what health stories are run: the media managers.

Sundberg argues that medicine and science will also benefit if journalists are better equipped to ask the hard questions: "The higher the level of scrutiny, the better the outcomes for us all."