

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

## **Media Bites: INSIDE STORY ON TV DOC**

A few weeks ago, you may have seen Dr John D'Arcy present a segment on Channel Seven's Today Tonight extolling the virtues of grommets in preventing hearing loss in children.

Here's the story of that story.

**9.45am:** The smooth tones of "Doc", as he calls himself, are being recorded at a rather groovy studio for an educational video for school children about head lice. It is, of course, commercially funded. D'Arcy regularly does such "corporates", on top of many other roles (this morning he chatted about depression on talkback radio while driving his son to school).

Formerly a GP at Epping, Papua New Guinea and the Isle of Wight, D'Arcy broke into the competitive world of TV doctoring in 1981, largely because his patients included many Seven staffers. And because the Pope had been shot. Seven wanted a doctor to speak on air about the Pope's chances. "I said 'he might survive, he might be dead'," laughs D'Arcy.

**11.45am:** In a meeting room somewhere in the Seven labyrinth, D'Arcy and co are planning today's story. Ideas for stories come from journals, websites, and magazines like this one. Doc explains that Seven is moving towards health stories which provide more information than controversy, as research shows audiences like to be left with an "outcome" rather than confusion. Seven will soon launch a health and lifestyle website providing information linked to its news and current affairs stories.

**1pm:** Just across the road from Ryde Hospital, the rooms of surgeon Ted Beckenham are crowded with equipment and TV types. Jacqueline, 8, is the "vision", which is so important in television. She seems perfectly at ease as the cameras, lights, and action roll. "Good evening" says D'Arcy to the camera - actually, this is a "live" cross, which will show tonight. It's unusual to fake these things, says D'Arcy. But it would be

impossible to set up this sort of deal at night. Two public relations officers from the New Children's Hospital smile and do the thumbs up when D'Arcy mentions their hospital.

**1.20pm:** Lucky it's not really live. As he admits later, D'Arcy is having a bad day. Just as he finds his stride, explaining what causes middle ear infection in children like Jackie, she reaches up from her chair and taps him on the belly. "Mum said you have got to call me Jacqueline," she interrupts. Much laughter all round. D'Arcy never quite recovers his poise, and filming requires several takes.

**1.30pm:** The soundman asks what to do about his bad back. Doc is also Seven's occupational health and safety doctor. Colleagues regularly ask for advice and scripts (of the medical kind). How *does* he find the time, on top of making a regular bulletin syndicated to 60 radio stations, audiocassettes for doctors, and television for doctors' surgeries?

**2pm:** Over lunch, D'Arcy says that if he had paid off his house (he says his income is about that of a suburban GP), he would probably work full-time in aid. He is on the board of the charity, The Australian Foundation for People of Asia and the Pacific, and recent visits to East Timor have involved both TV and medical work. But he generally enjoys media work - attitudes have changed from his early days when medical peers disapproved. "Nowadays, they ring me up," he says. "You only have to look at [the show] RPA to realise that doctors don't mind getting up and doing a bit of performing."

**3.10pm:** Back at Seven, the producer has put the piece together. The team thinks it has such appeal that it should run for three and a half minutes - 30 seconds longer than usual. This is luxury for D'Arcy who for years worked in news, where stories typically last just over a minute. Even so, there is no time to explore some of the controversies surrounding grommets.

D'Arcy says many medical friends assume that he must have a much better life in the media compared with his GP days. "I always make the comment that as a journalist you are constantly reporting on the actions of other people whereas a general practitioner is part of the action, and I miss that. "

