

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2001. The published version may have had minor changes.

### **Media Bites: STAR-STRUCK**

Max Markson, judging by his memoirs, is a black-belt master of the art of spin. The “agent to the stars” and unstoppable deal-maker knows just how to flog an angle to journalists to ensure that his clients - who have included Ita Buttrose, Dawn Fraser and Jane Flemming - get the profile that leads to lucrative sponsorships.

He has a great nose for a story and when trying to hook journalists on a yarn looks for the catchy headline. “If you can sell the headline, you can sell the story,” he says. “Remember, you never have an accident or an illness. You have a Brush With Death. You never get better, you have a Miracle Recovery. And you never see anything, you come Face to Face with it.”

Markson is also very well connected. When Bob and Hazel Hawke split up, he acted for both parties, according to his book *Show Me The Money!*, and sold their stories for megabucks to 60 Minutes and Women’s Weekly respectively.

As well as lining his clients’ pockets, Markson has also helped raise millions for charities over the years. He was behind fund-raisers for The Children’s Hospital at Westmead in Sydney which starred Raquel Welch and Nelson Mandela.

His latest coup is organising former United States president Bill Clinton to speak at a dinner for the hospital on September 8, which is expected to raise over one million dollars for its paediatric cardiology department, even after the hefty fee that Clinton commands.

“They’re the hottest tickets in town, I have sold \$100,000 worth of tickets today alone,” skites Markson the day after the do was formally announced. He is confident the function will sell out, despite a price tag of up to \$27,500 for premium packages.

Markson has long known the value of using celebrities to flog product, whether hair replacement therapy, ice cream, treadmills or Telstra. “If

you want to sell something, just get a celebrity to stick his or her face in front of it and you're halfway there," he says.

It's as if people are more likely to trust someone just because they are famous; no wonder Minister Wooldridge faces an uphill battle to win public sympathy in his battles with Kerryn Phelps. She is far more powerful than your average AMA leader because she is a celebrity.

Health promotion and advocacy campaigns have long understood the benefits of involving celebrities or capitalising on the interest generated by news of celebrity illnesses, according to a recent paper by Sydney University academics Simon Chapman and Julie-Anne Leask.

It notes that President Reagan's colon cancer and Alzheimers disease, his wife Nancy's breast cancer, basketballer Earvin "Magic" Johnson's HIV disclosure, rock musician Kurt Cobain's suicide, Muhammad Ali's Parkinsonism, Princess Diana's bulimia, Rolling Stone Keith Richard's heroin addiction and cellist Jacqueline Du Pre's multiple sclerosis increased public awareness of these problems.

And when cricketer Shane Warne was contracted to promote nicotine replacement gum and patches, at a reported cost of \$200,000, he attracted acres of newsprint - and the company's sales soared.

Apart from raising money and awareness, involving celebrities in health can have other benefits, says Elizabeth Crundall, of the Sydney Children's Hospital Foundation. When famous types like the Queen, Barbara Bush, Michael Jackson, and Crowded House have visited the Sydney Children's Hospital at Randwick, morale of staff and patients has risen, she says.

"We give the children a thrill of their lives and a day to remember - and we raise vital funds to benefit patients at the hospital," says Crundall.

Which is all very well and good for those areas able to attract or pay for celebrities to champion their causes. Children's hospitals will always find it easier to win celebrity endorsement than aged care facilities.

There are always far more famous people willing to work for breast cancer awareness than for stroke or lung cancer - remember how

reluctant former NSW Premier John Fahey was to admit publicly that his smoking might have had anything to do with his lung cancer.

Just imagine what someone like Max Markson might be able to do for Aboriginal health and other disadvantaged areas which are often “uncelebrated”.