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Media Bites: DOCTORS SAVE LIVES - DON'T READ ALL ABOUT IT

If you've spent much time following the media lately, you might have gleaned the following impressions of the world: that the cops are crooked, business leaders are inept, athletes are drug cheats, and Australians are racist.

There's clearly a bit of truth in all of the above, but it's certainly not a world view that acknowledges the hard work of many decent police officers, and business and sporting types. Not to mention those who cringe at talkback radio's use of language such as "the Muslim problem".

The very nature of news means that it gives a distorted picture of the world. News reflects the sensational rather than the everyday. Good news, generally speaking, does not make the headlines, for the simple reason that it doesn't attract readers. Would you rather read about the man who won Lotto, or his friend who won Lotto but lost his cheque?

So I find it hard to understand why many doctors seem convinced that the media is full of "doctor bashers" who are out to give medicine a particularly rough ride. The latest evidence of this professional paranoia comes from a study recently published in the *British Medical Journal*.

British researchers studied all medicine-related articles in the broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, and *Daily Mail*, in the month of November from 1980 to 2000, and judged whether the coverage of doctors was positive or negative. They undertook the study because of a widespread perception amongst British doctors that they were copping a media hiding in the wake of several medical disasters.

An accompanying article in the *BMJ* described the survey as "an example of our current preoccupation with what people are saying about us. A psychologist might argue that this is a sign of declining professional self confidence. A positive view would be that we are becoming more sensitive and responsive to the demands made by patients."

Or perhaps it is just a reflection of the low morale afflicting the profession, as has been highlighted in numerous journal articles around the world.

The study found there were twice as many negative stories about doctors as positive ones, but there was no significant change in the ratio of negative to positive stories over time. The total number of articles about doctors increased over time. "These data suggest that UK newspapers respond to incidents, rather than deliberately campaigning against doctors," the researchers concluded.

Responding to the study, London GP David Tovey wrote to the journal: "The treatment of doctors seems to me to be no different from that experienced by many other citizens in our society, and I cannot think of any particular reason why it should be."

It's a shame the study was asking the wrong question. What would have been really interesting to know is whether doctors receive more negative coverage than comparable groups, perhaps lawyers or other health professionals. I suspect this type of study might show that doctors don't do too badly at all in the media; that they are more likely than most to be quoted as figures of authority.

Negative headlines aside, doctors are doing pretty well in other ways. The study cited recent surveys in the US and Britain showing that public confidence in doctors remains very high, despite all the coverage about disasters such as paediatric surgery deaths in Bristol.

In one survey, 87 per cent of Brits polled said they would generally trust doctors to tell the truth. Second came teachers (85 per cent), followed by clergymen and priests (78 per cent), judges (77 per cent) and professors (76 per cent). By comparison, 52 per cent expected the ordinary man or woman in the street to tell the truth, 28 per cent expected honesty of business leaders.

Only 15 per cent expected journalists to tell the truth!

One bright spark at the BMJ tested an unusual methodology for measuring the public standing of doctors - a web search of doctor jokes, which found that the doctors' role is usually pretty innocuous.

“There is no indication that the unconscious purpose of the joke is to express bitterness and resentment towards doctors,” wrote the BMJ’s Christopher Martyn. “Contrast this with the role that the lawyer plays in lawyer jokes.”

So the news isn’t all bad.