

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: DOOR KNOCK

A few minutes after 6pm on Sunday, May 6, Kelly Burke stepped up to a shopfront of an unusually discreet style, considering its location in the seedy heart of Kings Cross, and pressed the buzzer.

Inside, there was an immediate reaction among staff, who had been waiting in nervous anticipation for their first client. Someone ran to open the door to Burke - but then quickly closed it.

That was enough evidence for Burke, a reporter for the Sydney Morning Herald. She knew she had a hot story - that two years after it was first proposed, the trial of a medically supervised injecting centre had finally opened at 66 Darlinghurst Road.

When it would open had been a closely guarded secret in an attempt to protect clients' privacy. As well, it was going to be difficult enough to build up a relationship of trust with such a wary group without them having to face media cameras.

At a news conference the previous week, the trial's organisers pleaded with journalists to stay away. This upset some reporters, who believed that publicity had helped get the trial this far and it wasn't fair to exclude them now. Others warned this approach would only prolong the Centre's agony.

The Centre's medical Director, Dr Ingrid van Beek, was adamant that she would not jeopardise her patients' privacy. But the media were invited to a pre-opening tour of the centre, which retains some of the glitzy fittings of the pinball parlour it once was. Video tape footage was also provided.

A Sunday evening was chosen for the opening in the hope of catching media off guard. Burke found out because of a tip-off to her paper.

Ironically, The Daily Telegraph, which had staked out the premises for the previous fortnight from a hotel opposite, had gone home and missed

the action. Within a few hours of Burke's buzz on the front door, the TV cameras arrived, and the media deluge began.

Over the next 24 hours, the Centre's media advisor, Pat Kennedy, fielded more than 150 calls from journalists around the world. Kennedy, a former nurse and ambulance officer with more than 15 years' experience in media management, including a stint with the NSW Health Department, says the only thing in his experience to attract a comparable media response was the Thredbo landslide disaster.

At a subsequent media briefing, journalists were again asked to stay away. But by the time van Beek returned to the Centre, dozens of journalists and cameras were lining the streets outside.

Their actions were widely criticised. "Shameful", said Professor Ian Webster, president of The Alcohol and Other Drugs Council. "Every citizen is entitled to privacy, especially when incapacitated or ill."

But it would be naive to expect the media to do anything other than try to cover a story of such international significance. The real question is whether anything could have been done to reduce the impact on the Centre's clients.

Only eight people attended the Centre that first night and two the next day (compared with up to 61 in a four-hour session in the weeks after the media disappeared).

If Kelly Burke had been handling the publicity, she would have invited the media to an opening with "a few media friendly drug users". Once they had got what they wanted, journalists would have been more likely to respect the Centre's requests to stay away, she says.

But van Beek says she could not ethically do this. "You have to do everything you can to protect the confidentiality of your patients," she says. "We're not opening a shopping mall here, we're opening a health service for people with serious health problems." As well, in her experience drug users who agree to media interviews often later regret it.

Kennedy adds: "Whichever way it was managed, the media were always going to be on the doorstep filming unsuspecting drug users."

Perhaps. But there would have been less incentive to stake out the joint if everyone had been told when it would open and been invited along to a managed event.

Nonetheless, van Beek is pretty pleased with the coverage, and acknowledges the media has a job to do. When a Swiss injecting centre opened, the media camped on its doorstep for two months. “Compared with that, a few days is not so bad,” she says.

Kennedy says there has been surprisingly little negative coverage. “Perhaps...more people than we realise have had relatives and friends who’ve been touched by tragedy involving drug use.”

The publicity has had some unexpected consequences: a few diabetics have come knocking, looking for somewhere private to inject insulin. Apparently it’s impossible to find an unlocked toilet in the Cross these days.