

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: Time travel**

She was beloved by the people, the newspaper said, because she was “a good woman, a good wife, and a good mother”. As the news of her impending demise began to spread around Australia, crowds gathered in the streets, waiting to hear the latest, and prayers were said in churches everywhere.

Yet despite the intense public interest in the health of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, in early 1901, the news of her subsequent death did not capture the front pages.

In the *Sydney Morning Herald* of January 24, 1901, readers had to wait until half way down the first column of page six for the small, sober headline “The Death of the Queen”. It followed a series of short, rather unsensational news reports, including that a boy boiling his billy had been responsible for a big grass fire the previous day.

The story of the royal departure might have been buried, but once it finally started, there was no stopping it. “In her life and person she held up to the imitation of the millions of her countrywomen the true type of the womanly woman, which has made the life of the English home what it is, kept British domesticity sweet, and held society in all its grades together,” the article declared. And there was plenty more gushing in that vein.

A far cry, of course, from how newspapers today report such events. There was no photo, no graphic summarising key events in queenly history, no journalist’s byline - let alone a picture byline - and no comment pieces from professional Royal watchers. Just lots of dense text demanding concentrated reading, in contrast to the modern trend of giving us easy-to-skim, bite-sized chunks of information in a format reminiscent of cyberspace.

So much has changed in the way newspapers report the world, reflecting changes in technology and society, the emergence of other forms of media, and commercial pressures. But what is fun about flicking

through the papers of 1901, apart from their purple prose, is that some things haven't changed all that much.

Although it was well before the age of specialist health reporters, health issues were regularly mentioned, in both editorial and advertising.

Then, as now, there were stories offering confusing dietary advice - an article about a new book, "Food and the Principles of Dietetics", noted that it gave contradictory information. Instead, a doctor suggested: "Do anything you like but do nothing to excess. Moderation should be the rule of life."

And there were stories about new research which sounded too good to be true - one study, involving a young man who had been bald for three years, suggested Rontgen rays might cure baldness. "The bald head, it would seem, is to join the host of troublesome things that are being removed before the inroads of beneficent scientific research," the report promised.

And there were stories about hospitals' performance - including a breakdown of how many patients admitted to Sydney's Royal Prince Alfred Hospital had died, been cured, relieved or left "unrelieved". In 1900, patients stayed at the hospital for 27 days on average.

And there were stories about health risks - including one about a revival in snuff taking in which a medical wit was asked if a moderate amount injured the brain. "No," he replied, "for no man with an ounce of brain would ever dream of using it."

And there were stacks of advertisements for all manner of pills and potions, claiming to cure all manner of ills and complaints. Many relied on the endorsements of experts or of individuals who had been miraculously cured and who volunteered the details of their previous illnesses in great depth.

One brand of cigarettes, advertised as being recommended by The Lancet and British Medical Journal, was described as a scientific preparation "approved of and employed under the highest medical authority for the treatment of asthma, bronchitis, catarrh, influenza, hay fever and ordinary colds."

Which reminds me of a quotation that I just found on the Net: "The charm of history and its enigmatic lesson consist in the fact that, from age to age, nothing changes and yet everything is completely different."