This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2002. The published version may have had minor changes.

Media Bites: MAKING DIFFICULT CHOICES

It's funny what grabs your attention when you're floating in the bath with a weekend newspaper. The throwaway line which caught me recently said something like, shyness is a form of narcism. Shy people assume that everyone is looking at them, when in fact other people have probably got a million other, more pressing things on their mind than the blushing person in the corner.

The principle behind that remark came to mind recently when I sat in on a University of Sydney course teaching people how to work with the media. The course convenor, Professor Simon Chapman, put up a slide showing a letter that a medical college had sent my boss several years ago, when I was working as medical writer at the Sydney Morning Herald.

The president of the college wrote of his "anger and dismay" that the SMH and I had not covered a recent international congress of his speciality in Sydney. It had offered a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity to tackle public ignorance about his specialty, but "the Sydney Morning Herald's medical writer couldn't be bothered to educate herself, or her readers" about the specialty.

Professor Chapman then put up another slide, which he had asked me to compile several years ago. It was unrelated to the College's letter of complaint but helped explain my apparent neglect of what had indeed been a huge medical conference.

The list detailed the dozens and dozens of potential stories which hit my desk or telephone in just one day at the SMH. There were journals, newsletters, reports, press releases, letters, phone calls, and suggestions from my colleagues and many bosses. This was before the days of widespread use of e-alerts and email, which only add to the information-overload of health and medical journalists (sound familiar?).

Compiling the list was a useful exercise. It made me appreciate that one of the most important aspects of a journalist's job, particularly in health where we are so spoilt for choice, is the selection of which stories to

cover. When so many health issues and interests are competing for media space, the journalist's role as gatekeeper is crucial. To borrow from Salman Rushdie, "every story one chooses to tell is a kind of censorship, it prevents the telling of other tales".

The irony of working in a field rich with potential stories is that it can make it too easy to make the easy choices. When there are so many fluffy, funny, quirky subjects to write about, it is harder to instead cover those issues which are difficult, confronting or going to make you unpopular. The difficult stories tend to take more time and effort, which is another barrier when journalists, like everyone else, are under pressure to produce more with less. And the fluffy stories can be more fun to do.

A series of articles in the current Walkley magazine, the professional forum for journalists (http://magazine.walkleys.com/), laments the standards of business reporting in Australia. They suggest that much business coverage is overly promotional - playing "cheer squad", rather than asking tough, critical questions.

"There are still too many business leaders and flacks who think business journalism should be confined to turning annual and interim results into English and producing obsequious write-ups of Big Company Announcements," wrote a senior business journalist at The Age, Leon Gettler "...when some companies collapse, the media might have to share some of the blame, along with the regulators and gurus, accountants and investors." In another article, SMH journalist Anne Lampe described how the NSW road service group, NRMA, had subjected her to intense legal pressure because it did not like her reporting of the organisation's woes.

Ironically, the mag arrived in the mailbox at the end of a long day on the phone, interviewing stacks of prominent GPs and academics for a profile for this magazine of the new RACGP president, Professor Michael Kidd. Many offered the comment that the College's problems mightn't be so bad if only the press would give it a break, and leave it to fix up its messy problems outside the uncomfortable glare of the media spotlight.

It's a reminder that the most important stories are sometimes those which the high and mighty - whether a medical organisation, politician or corporate - don't want us to cover.