

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: The double-edged sword

Betsy Lehman, 39, was being treated for breast cancer at a leading US hospital and was expecting to go home soon to her husband and two young daughters when she died unexpectedly.

A few months later, a routine review of hospital records uncovered the reason for her heart failure.

An ambiguously worded protocol had resulted in Lehman having a huge overdose of chemotherapy. The review also identified another woman who suffered irreversible heart damage after a similar overdose.

The tragedy was subsequently reported on page one of the Boston Globe newspaper, where Lehman had been a health columnist, and led to further coverage of the systemic issues underlying medical mistakes.

This story was cited recently in an article in the journal, *Quality and Safety in Health Care*, arguing that the media has played an important role in forcing health systems and professionals to respond to evidence about the harm caused by health care.

If not for the damning headlines about tragedies like Lehman's, the burgeoning safety and quality movement might have taken even longer to get off the ground, the article suggests. It is titled: "Pushing the profession: how the news media turned patient safety into a priority".

Perhaps you've already guessed the article was written by a journalist.

So maybe it's a biased view, but there's more than a ring of truth to it. As every lobbyist knows, the best way to get the attention of health ministers and their staff is via page one of the Daily Blather.

All of which makes the recent investigation of three deaths in hospitals in the Hunter region of NSW quite remarkable. Over a period of several weeks, three men died as a result of multiple stuff ups in their care.

Their deaths never hit the headlines. There was no external pressure for the hospitals to do anything other than what was usually done in such situations: file an incident report and carry on pretty much as usual.

But these men died within weeks of the Hunter Area Health Service's introduction of a new policy requiring thorough reporting and investigation of adverse events with the aim, not of identifying culprits and allocating blame, but of preventing other such problems.

The service's CEO, Professor Katherine McGrath, says staff were "gobsmacked" by how many things were revealed to have gone wrong in the men's care. The deaths were judged to have been preventable, and at least 70 contributing factors were identified, with communication and teamwork problems accounting for nearly half of these.

As part of the policy's emphasis on open disclosure, the men's families were told about what had gone wrong.

Professor McGrath spoke publicly about the cases at a recent workshop convened by the Australian Council for Safety and Quality in Health Care.

She also told how her earliest professional experiences - as a haematologist working with blood transfusion services during the nightmare early days of AIDS - convinced her that it is better to be open and frank about adverse events than to attempt to cover them up.

"I learnt that the worst thing for people, the most anxiety-provoking issue, is lack of knowledge," she says. "When they don't know or don't understand what is going on, they get angry or they get distressed. When you try and put a spin on it, people know very quickly and they get angry and more upset."

Dr McGrath says her service is at the start of a long and difficult process: it is far easier to diagnose than treat such systemic problems. "It's not something you can put in a quick fix," she says. "We need to redesign the system, to start with a blank page."

She believes the lack of media coverage of the cases has been helpful. "If the media is on the doorstep, you are forced into a crisis mode and a spin doctor response," she says. "Because we have initiated this in a

pro-active, non-crisis environment, we've been able to take the time to do it properly."

It's a reminder, perhaps, that the media spotlight can be a double-edged sword.