

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: NOT EVERYONE'S A WINNER**

Why do some news stories grab the front pages and others, which might seem equally important, end up as two sentences on page 37? Sometimes, it can come down to something as random as whether a key player in the news production process has a personal interest in the subject.

But when an issue is soaking up a disproportionate share of media attention over an extended period, a “winners and losers” analysis can yield some interesting insights into the factors driving news selection.

Take the prolonged onslaught of meningococcal headlines this year. No doubt they reflect, at least partly, what a nasty, frightening infection it can be, though rare. But many observers have been left wondering just why the disease has been so much in the news considering that Australia, unlike some other countries, is not in the grip of an outbreak.

The raised awareness has been beneficial for some. Parent and other community groups which have sought to focus public attention on the disease believe this has promoted quicker diagnosis and treatment. Some grieving parents might also be helped by telling their stories publicly, particularly if they feel it is helping others.

Other obvious winners are the vaccine manufacturers, who are struggling to meet demand. There's nothing like a succession of negative front-page headlines to make a government jump to action. When John Howard intervenes in a health issue (he extended the target for the multi-million dollar vaccination program beyond the experts' recommendations), you can be sure clever politics are involved.

Clever marketing has also been at work. Vaccine manufacturer Wyeth has been funding a variety of activities aimed at raising awareness of meningitis this year. Its PR agency Porter Novelli has done much of the work, often under the auspices of The Meningitis Centre in Perth, which is partly funded by an “unconditional educational grant” from Wyeth.

Porter Novelli, with funding from Wyeth, co-ordinated the first meningitis awareness week in June, which led to wide media coverage. The agency also arranged production of a video on meningitis sent to 4,500 child care centres in April. Funded by Wyeth, it was endorsed by The Meningitis Centre, the Amanda Young Foundation, and the Australian Federation of Child Care Associations. Some believe the video was overly alarmist, and the Meningitis Foundation did not endorse it.

Wyeth is also funding an advertising campaign in parenting magazines, under the logo of The Meningitis Centre.

Other winners in this analysis are those in whom the new vaccination program will prevent serious illness. To put this in perspective, the new vaccines protect against serogroup C, which accounts for about 33 per cent of meningococcal cases in Australia. Nationally, about 35 people die and 384 suffer neurological complications from meningococcal disease each year.

So what about the losers? These include overly anxious parents who have been crowding emergency departments, doctors' surgeries and telephone hotlines. "Our hospital has seen fewer cases this year than last year and that's the story for the whole of western Sydney, and yet more people are coming in worried about it," says Kim Oates, head of the Children's Hospital at Westmead, Sydney. "The extra load means that the way we deliver care isn't always as efficient or as prompt."

Wyeth's director of corporate affairs, Rachel David, says she has been horrified by some of the media's coverage of meningococcal disease. Wyeth has supported groups to promote community awareness about meningitis, but has not sought to focus on meningococcal disease in particular, she says.

"I really don't think that the way meningococcal disease is being presented in the media is at all helpful to the public health campaigns," she says. "People need to be aware, but not terrified, not to the point where every child with a cold is taken into casualty."

But it's perhaps not surprising that so many parents are alarmed, given the tendency for one of the meningococcal group spokesmen to call it "the most frightening disease known to man".

Other losers are the issues crowded out of the media spotlight and thus less likely to attract public or political attention - like the stories about those who die in road crashes, who often don't even make it to page 37.