

**NSW Health Promotion Symposium
Getting Evidence into Practice
28-29 June 2006**

“Health Promotion, Advocacy and the Media”
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As a freelance journalist, I write for many different magazines and publications. One of my most regular gigs is with Australian Rural Doctor magazine. It's also one of my favourite gigs - not because it has a particularly large or influential audience. It is, as you might imagine, a rather niche publication read mainly by country doctors.

The reason I enjoy writing for Australian Rural Doctor is that while sitting at my messy desk in my messy home office, I get to traverse the country and “meet” - over the telephone at least - some very interesting and often inspiring people.

Whenever rural health hits the media headlines, the news tends to be bad. We hear about the closure of country hospitals, the shameful state of Indigenous health, and how country people tend to have worse health than their metropolitan counterparts.

But what I have learnt, writing for Australian Rural Doctor over the past few years, covering stories like the aftermath of the Junee bushfires, is that country communities also have much to teach the rest of us about resilience, innovation and caring for community. Necessity is the mother of invention, after all.

So let me introduce you to a few of the people I interviewed for a recent article for Australian Rural Doctor, examining the quiet revolution which is occurring in rural health as a result of the rapidly expanding role of practice nurses. They are not only helping to address serious medical workforce shortages, but are also helping build the capacity of many general practices to respond to population health needs.

Once focused largely on tasks such as ordering supplies, practice nurses are increasingly taking a broader role in managing chronic diseases and in community education more generally.

One of the article's subjects is Cathy Pattullo, a practice nurse at Mudgee. When she first started in general practice 15 years ago, Cathy spent as much time working as a receptionist as a nurse. Her role has since expanded dramatically, with one recent achievement being nothing less than a change in national health policy. She is widely credited with being a driving force behind the introduction of Medicare item numbers enabling rural practice nurses to do Pap smears.

Ms Pattullo trained in women's health three years ago after realising that her area was facing a worsening shortage of female doctors. Mudgee now has no permanent female doctor. But GPs at her surgery were initially reluctant to allow her to proceed with a women's health clinic because of insurance concerns. They told her she would need a Medicare item number.

That didn't put her off from proceeding further. Instead, she went and got one - she collected signatures of support from 600 local women, and began to lobby her local MP, the then Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson, and other politicians.

When the item number was introduced in January 2005, Ms Pattullo established a weekly clinic providing Pap smears, breast checks, general health education, and pelvic floor assessments. In the first three months, there was a trebling in the number of Pap smears being done at the practice.

Cathy also writes a regular column in the local paper as part of her commitment to health promotion. She is overwhelmed by the feedback that the column provokes. It sounds like it is very well read by the locals, including some of those who you mightn't expect to be interested in health. No doubt this is because she knows her audience; she knows the local community, their interests and concerns. And she speaks in their language.

The article about practice nurses also described how a general practice at Toronto in the Hunter Valley is employing mental health nurses to help improve care for patients with mental health problems. A specialist

mental health nurse triages, counsels and, where necessary, refers patients suffering mental health problems, grief or stress-related issues.

Diane Morrison is one of the mental health nurses working in the practice. She had previously worked in hospitals for more than 30 years, and was shocked when she started last year as a practice nurse to discover the extent of the mental health burden presenting in general practice.

She sees many patients who would be reluctant to access specialist mental health services, and says her role is important for facilitating early intervention

I was delighted to come across Cathy Pattullo and Diane Morrison when researching the story about practice nurses. Not only because they are doing good work and seem to be making a real difference for their local communities.

I was also delighted because when I rang, out of the blue, to see if they would agree to be interviewed for the article, they didn't hesitate. They were happy to engage with a journalist they'd never heard of.

As you might imagine from the small sketch I've given you, Cathy and Diane are extremely passionate about the areas they work in and about improving their community's health and wellbeing. They were delighted to have an opportunity to spread the news about their work. They weren't encumbered by bureaucratic or political constraints about speaking with the media.

So many times when I approach other people in the health sector - particularly those employed by government - for comment about a story, I can almost see the warning bells ringing in their heads. Their instinctive reaction, when faced with a media query, is to recoil. They see media interaction as negative, risky, and likely to have adverse consequences. Not to mention that it is often extremely inconvenient for people with busy schedules.

I don't know if you read The Diary, a column on the back of News Review in Saturday's SMH where various prominent people describe their week. Last Saturday, it was penned by Nicholas Cowdery, the Director of Public Prosecutions. He told of receiving a phone call the

previous weekend from the Attorney-General's office about a media story.

The AG's office wanted a response to the story and wanted it pronto, which meant Cowdery had to shelve his plans for Monday morning. Instead he spent it writing a report for the Attorney-General about the media article. "Nine months out from an election and the politicians are more sensitive to the media than usual," he wrote. "The public of NSW should be impressed with the speedy and thorough attention given to their matters."

I don't know about you but that last comment from Mr Cowdery had a ring of sarcasm about it.

I suspect he would have preferred not to have spent his Sunday and Monday dealing with the repercussions of a media report which, as he pointed out, contained a number of inaccuracies.

But there is a useful lesson in that anecdote for the health promotion and public health community - and for anyone generally trying to influence public policy and debate. There's hardly a more immediate and effective way of focussing public and political attention on an issue than through the headlines.

We can argue the pros and cons of this fact of life. The influence of the media on political and policy processes or upon public behaviour is not always positive. It can divert attention from more important issues and have all sorts of other negative consequences. But this is the reality of the environment in which your sector operates.

It is not surprising that many people are reluctant to engage with the media. It can be personally and professionally confronting. The media is an unpredictable and sometimes carnivorous beast with many heads. But I would argue that if you're not feeding the beast, then you can't complain if public health remains the poor cousin of our health system.

If you're not prepared to put up your heads and engage in media and community debate, then you can't complain if funding for public health and health promotion remains just a drop in the bucket of government health expenditure.

Your discussions today, which have centred so much around equity, seem so removed from so much of the public discourse, which is often driven by what Mark Latham described as 'downward envy'. I can't help but wondering if how the public discourse might be influenced if, rather than speaking amongst yourselves about equity, you were engaging more broadly in community debate.

Engaging constructively with the media requires a pragmatic understanding of the media and how it works; it also requires courage, conviction and creativity.

To expand a little more on how the media works, I thought I'd introduce you to a few more people. This time, however, they are imaginary characters but solidly based in reality, if that makes sense.

The first we shall call Lois. She is a reporter at a daily newspaper where working conditions have changed significantly in recent years. Once her routine in the morning was to open the mail, check the faxes and chat to her chief of staff about the stories she was working on. On some days she might have to sift through up to 100 pieces of information - letters, press releases, journals etc. She thought herself overwhelmed by information.

But then along came the internet and e-mail, and these days she feels the information flood has turned into a tsunami.

Some days she gets so overwhelmed by the demands on her time and attention that she finds herself getting very snappy with the PR people who ring to check whether she has received their latest press release. Other things have changed too about her working environment.

When she first started at the paper a decade ago, she regularly escaped the office to interview real people, attend conferences, and to research stories. There's been a noticeable change however; these days she and her colleagues are under far greater pressure to do more with less - produce more stories with less time. She rarely leaves the office and now does much of her work over the phone.

She is less willing and able to invest her time and energy in ideas for stories which might not come together at the last moment - she is less likely to take risks. Her working environment encourages her to select

stories which at the end of the day will live up to the promises she made her chief of staff in the morning.

She is also pulled a hundred different ways by her organisation's internal demands - there are so many different bosses wanting her stories; the editor of the Saturday news section of the paper starts hassling her on Monday morning about what story she will have for the Saturday paper; not to mention all the other sections of the paper who are keen to have her copy. They are also trying to do more - fill more space - with less resources.

The next person I would like you to meet is one of Lois' many bosses, Clark. He is the paper's news editor. Clark has come up through the ranks of journalism - working in state parliament, doing general rounds; years ago, he even did Lois' round, covering health, for a while. It drives her crazy because he thinks he knows what the angle should be on her stories and is always suggesting stupid story ideas.

More than once she has had to drop a really good story to follow up some idea of Clark's, usually prompted by something he heard at a dinner party about some weird disease or whacky cure for cancer, but has no evidence to back up.

But the real reason for Clark's meteoric rise through newspaper management is his natural affinity with the world of marketing. In another sign of the changing times, the marketers rule these days at *The Daily Blather* and they have decided there is one audience that matters above all others.

These are the so-called AB readers - the affluent professionals beloved by cashed-up advertisers. The theory goes that media outlets which attract audiences at the AB end of the socio-economic status scale are more likely to win advertisers or, even better, to get away with charging them premium rates.

In other words, the allocation of scarce resources in ever-more stretched newsrooms is driven, at least in part, by what market researchers tell Clark and his fellow media managers about what AB audiences want to know about. This influences not only the selection of stories, but also how they are presented and packaged. The focus groups even influence what photographs are run in the paper.

This drives Lois and her colleagues absolutely crazy. Old-fashioned news values are being distorted by consideration of whether a story has relevance or interest to AB audiences. Lois can't remember the last time she managed to get a story about Aboriginal health on page one. If she can successfully shepherd such a story through the tortuous news processes - convincing news conference and several news managers that such a story has to run, it is almost certain to be buried in the back pages of the paper or in a buried position on the page.

But life isn't all rosy for Clark, despite his intuitive understanding of AB audiences. Readership figures were down yet again in the latest readership survey and he knows he is going to be under even greater pressure from his bosses in months to come. The media industry - at least its traditional forms - is struggling for survival. One of journalists' favourite topics of conversation is whether they have a future in the world of new media, where it seems increasingly unlikely that companies will want to fund the expensive business of producing quality journalism.

Some of these themes may sound familiar to you. Many sections of the workforce feel under siege, feel powerless and buffeted by constant pace of change and restructuring.

Which brings us to the third person, I want you to meet. Her name is Sally Atherton-Browne. She has two children who go to private schools, she works in the city and lives in the eastern suburbs. She is, as her double barrelled surname suggests, classic AB material. Her household income is well over \$200,000 a year and she has no concept of not having enough money to pay the electricity bill, or not being able to take the family overseas each year. She is the person Clark pictures every morning at news conference when he's running through the news list.

The trouble is that Sally is too busy to read the newspapers most days. They still subscribe, of course, but she rarely gets the paper out of its wrapper before 9 o'clock at night, when she gets a few overdue minutes to herself.

Then she is too tired to give it more than a cursory flick - she has already heard the headlines of most stories on radio and TV anyway - although the story about Kylie Minogue's breast cancer did catch her eye and she

actively sought out all the stories about Kylie. She is terrified of getting breast cancer.

Sally is sick of all the doom and gloom in the world, can't bear to look at another horrific photo from Iraq, and prefers the lifestyle stories in the paper's glossy colour magazine.

It might help you to keep Lois, Clark and Sally in mind if you want to harness the media in your advocacy efforts. They are trying to tell you a few things.

First of all, be clear about your goals, who you are trying to reach and whether the media can help you to do this. People speak of the media as an homogenous entity. The media in all its diversity may share an overall goal - of connecting and engaging its audiences - but how this is done varies between different brands and types of media. Try to think of the Loises, Clarks and Sallys when considering which brand and type of media might be useful to your goal and when framing your message.

Lois, Clark and Sally also highlight another important point - that to engage with the media requires a realistic and pragmatic understanding of what we are and how we work.

We are not in the business of doing good works or promoting your particular message, no matter how worthy it may be.

The media business - and here it is important to draw a distinction between the professional imperatives of the individual journalist and the commercial imperatives of the media industry - is intensely competitive. Your story will be competing against many others that are striving to be heard, and some which will be backed by far bigger, slicker PR dollars.

But despite the growing role of market research, the sort of story that makes a journalist walk around the news room grinning "I've got a great story" will still be more likely to see the light of day than one which has the journalist walking around with a worried look as they wonder about how they will sell their story to the news editor.

So understand what makes a "great story" for a journalist. These tend to be sensational, involve scandal or conflict, have weird or quirky elements, or a strong human interest - the sort of story that even an

exhausted Sally can't go past. So you have to think of the story behind the issue or angle you are trying to raise. How can you turn this issue into a story that will capture the attention of busy commuters, frazzled parents, and other overloaded minds?

On this point, journalists are much more interested in the N of one than anything else. Politicians and others making decisions about health funding might want evidence of the population-based impact of your work but journalists know that it is the story of the individual that their audiences will relate to, rather than the population-based study involving anonymous hundreds of thousands.

A shark attack will trump tobacco-related deaths every time. So think, who is the N of one behind your issue? This doesn't mean that you always have to find the case study to illustrate your issue; it does mean thinking of how to tell your evidence-based issue in a way that is engaging, how to turn evidence into a story.

I would be the first to acknowledge, however, that effective engagement with the media is easier said than done and involves potential risks. Like any intervention, engagement with media as part of your advocacy work involves potential risks and benefits. You have to assess these and weigh them up.

But you can't afford to be too precious when dealing with the media beast. Inevitably in chaotic, pressured news business, glitches will occur. You may not like how you have been quoted, or how your story has been framed. It doesn't mean you shouldn't try again next time.

One of the risks for advocates is the risk of losing the integrity of your message when trying to work within the constraints of the media's appetite for sensation. How to frame your message in a way that engages the media and its audiences without, for example, provoking unnecessary public fear and alarm or unrealistic hope?

I don't think it's a coincidence that Sally is petrified about getting breast cancer. Breast cancer advocates have been so successful at garnering media attention that perhaps it has come at a cost.

But don't be too wary of taking risks in your advocacy works. Don't be frightened of upsetting powerful interests, if that will help your cause.

Apart from anything, your issue is more likely to get a run if there is some controversy involved.

Don't be constrained; don't feel that you can comment only on health debates. As you know more than I it is the sectors outside health which have so much influence over the population's health. The public health community has been largely absent from public debate about the impact of changing IR climate on community's health.

In recent years it has seemed to me that many advocates are becoming much more cautious of what they will say publicly in case they upset health departments or other funders. Governments are exerting tighter control than ever on the information flow, and this is not good news for advocates or for the community's health.

You might know the work of US newspaper columnist Maureen Dowd - her columns appear regularly in Australia. She once said: Wooing the press is an exercise roughly akin to picnicking with a tiger. You might enjoy the meal, but the tiger always eats last.

I would like to add that there are plenty of examples of effective public health advocates who have been able to build constructive relationships with the media. Think thalidomide, tobacco, HIV, asbestos and the list goes on. In more recent times, mental health advocates have worked hard to put mental health on the agenda of politicians and the political process.

I am not suggesting that you have any real chance of taming the tiger. Occasionally you might suffer a nasty bite or even a mauling. And some of us might agree that the goal should not be to tame the tiger anyway; a tame tiger cannot do its job properly - of keeping everyone on their toes.

But if you work with the tiger - and seize the opportunity as did Cathy Pattullo and Diane Morrison when they received an unexpected phone call - you might just find that improving the tiger's diet will have some health benefits for the broader community.

Thank you.

