



Doctors: the media's favourite worst nightmare

Kamran Abbasi

Editor, *JRSM*,

E-mail: kamran.abbasi@rsm.ac.uk

If you believe Alastair Campbell, former advisor to Tony Blair, you will worry about the media, its loss of objectivity, and its desire to cover 'real' news. Indeed, people most adept at manipulating the media are often the most cynical about its integrity, partly because they understand how readily a story can be spun into a web of distortion and hyperbole.

Media manipulation is not the preserve of the experienced. Arctic Monkeys, young rock sensations from Sheffield, have catapulted their short but award-winning career by ingenious use of new and old media. Like Campbell, ability and attitude have helped, but they might not have succeeded without an instinctive ability to judge how the public reacts to the media.

Almost a decade ago, doctors became the victims of a media assault. Newspaper editors wanted to expose the public to a world of butchers and grocers, doctors unable to cut in a straight line or keep their trousers up. Harold Shipman didn't help the media image of doctors, and neither did the government's assault on the 'forces of conservatism', A.K.A. the medical profession.

'Open season' on doctors was thought to be a passing fad but the media's appetite has never really been sated. Instead of butchers and grocers, the media's current popular myth is that doctors are overpaid and underworked. This misperception is at the heart of the current conflict between the profession and government. The assault on the forces of conservatism continues unabated, and the profession looks in disarray, scattering under the relentless fire of Alan Johnson and Gordon Brown.

Yet the media, of course, does get it wrong – and regularly. The *JRSM*, like any journal, is also part of the media and equally prone to making mistakes and indulging biases. Journal editors, do, however, like to believe that many of us provide readers with a sober analysis of events based on reliable evidence. Anybody who has been intimate with peer review understands how misguided that

belief can be, but data do lend credence to an argument.

An argument over the media's coverage of trastuzumab (Herceptin) divided the judges at last year's Guild of Health Writers Awards. Was the sudden ascendancy of trastuzumab, a novel treatment for breast cancer, a triumph of marketing over evidence? As chair of the judging panel, I took a casting vote, presenting the award to an article arguing that there was evidence to support the use of trastuzumab but that the marketing campaign was ingenious in the way that it exploited the media.

First came the award, and now come the data (*JRSM* 2008;101:124–31). An analysis by the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination at the University of York finds that the newspaper coverage of trastuzumab was characterized by uncritical reporting. The regulatory approval process for NICE was largely ignored by newspapers, with a stark focus on the public's failure to access trastuzumab, a name that the public rarely heard because the proprietary name – Herceptin – reigned supreme. The Guild's award-winning article, by Sarah Boseley of the *Guardian*, questioned the information about the new drug and the motives of those who sought to set the news agenda, which is the exact conclusion of the authors of the study in this month's *JRSM*. This finding is not unique to the UK, as a forthcoming *JRSM* paper will reveal.

The media, for all its failings, serves a valuable role in society, particularly when it holds powerful individuals, organizations, and governments accountable to the public. It is less fun when the media turns its heat on you or your profession, but the lesson for the medical profession is that it has failed to understand the media or ride the tsunami of attention with the skill of a wizened media expert like Alastair Campbell or the gusto of those teenage upstarts, Arctic Monkeys. Unless the forces of conservatism address this fundamental issue they will remain the media's favourite worst nightmare.