

# **Medicine, the Media and Screening**

**RCGP Annual National Primary Care  
Conference**

**John Illman**

# Talking points

- What do journalists get confused about?
- Where do they get their information?
- Telling 'the truth': the conflict zone
- What makes a health scare?

**If only.....**



# Confusion (or cynicism?)

- Mixed messages from the profession
- Commercial interests
- Scientific aspiration (possibly naive)

# Mixed messages

- 'Good'
- 'Unreliable'
- 'Anxiety provoking'

# Mixed messages

One in nine

# Mixed messages

‘We don’t want people to panic, but I’m admitting that American medicine has over-promised when it comes to screening. The advantages have been exaggerated.’

*Dr Otis Brawley, CMO, American*

*Cancer Society. October 21, 2009. NYT*

# Commercial interests

‘With today’s busy lifestyle, *finding time to visit the doctor* can often be difficult....health checks don’t take long and in many cases early screening has literally saved lives.’

# Commercial interests

- Genetic screening
- Insurance companies

# JIC news “values” scale

- Novelty
- Universality
- Topicality
- Impact
- Controversy



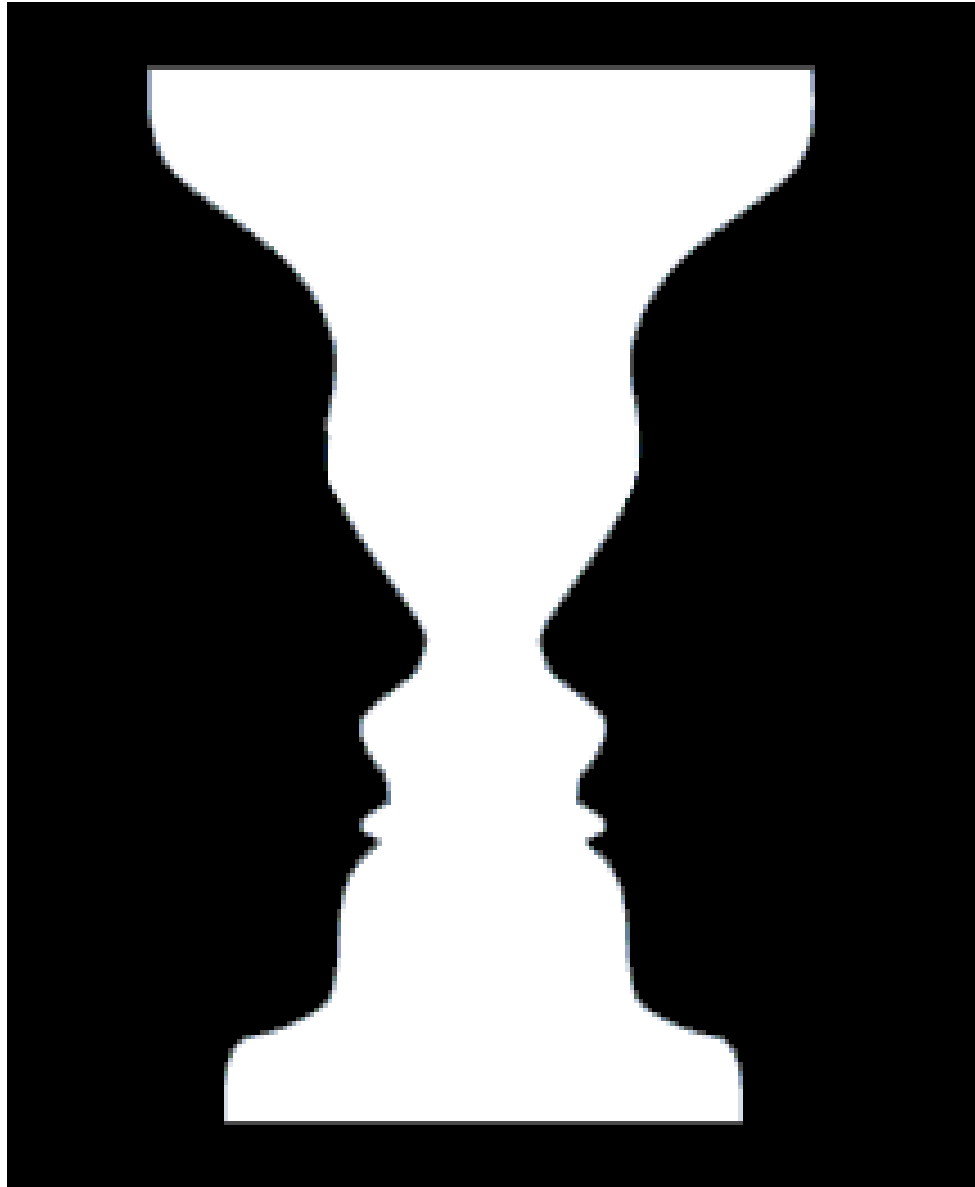
# Health scare

- Novelty
  - Universality
  - Topicality
  - Impact
  - Controversy
- PLUS  
UNCERTAINTY

# The quest for certainty

‘While the science base and knowledge are important, unanswered questions remain, and there is often real uncertainty in science itself. This makes it difficult to present the public with clear information in all cases. The public should have a right to as much information as possible, but people also have to recognise that this information may be incomplete.’

*Sir Kenneth Calman, former CMO, DoH*



# Your take home message

“Things should be made as simple as possible, but not any simpler.”

*Albert Einstein (1879-1955), Nobel Prize winner*

