

**Media portrayal of general practice:
information or misinformation?**

John Illman Communications
Royal College of General Practitioners
Bournemouth, October 3, 2008

Aims and objectives

- Doctor bashing
- Telling “the truth”
- Using the media

By way of a preface.....

- Information or misinformation?
- What about communication?
- Information is *giving out*
- Communication is *getting through*

Getting through

- Consultation: *With* the patient
- Media: *Beyond* the individual patient

Turning science upside down

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| • <i>Science</i> | <i>Media</i> |
| • History | Conclusion |
| • Background | Current situation |
| • Current situation | Background |
| • Conclusion | History |

Imagine.....

- 7-30am
- The Radio Four Today programme
- You are one of the co-presenters
- How are you going to hold the audience?

Q

A

Q

A

Q

A

(boring
answer)

(boring
answer)

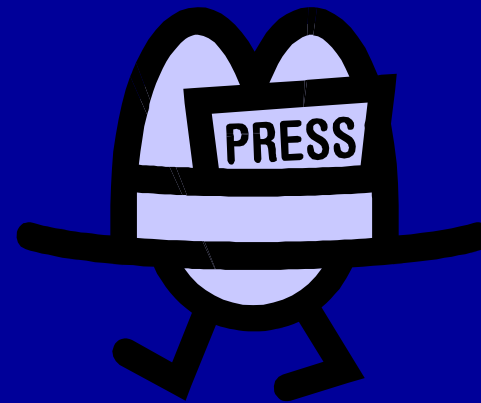
butting in
to stop
boredom

Doctor bashing

Welcome to the club

Risk-benefit ratio

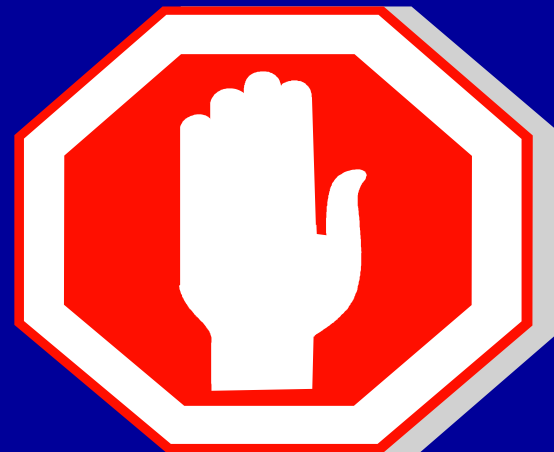
“Psychiatrists should not be discouraged from talking to or writing for the media. If we do not represent our position, it will be misrepresented by the media.”



*Dr. Philip Timms, Guys and
St Thomas UMDS, London*

Risk-benefit ratio

“Professionals often avoid the media because of worries about misquotation and over-simplification.”



*Kay R, Martin B, Kelly D, Stark C (1997) Using the Media during Mental Health Week
Psychiatric Bulletin 21 451-453*

Public trust polls

- **Doctors (92%)**
- Teachers (88%)
- Professors (80%)
- Clergymen (75%)
- Politicians (20%)
- **Journalists (19%)**

*Ipsos MORI poll of 2000 adults, commissioned by Royal College of Physicians (2006),
to establish whom the public trust to tell the truth*

Journalist bashing

“Believe nothing you see in the newspapers. They have done more to create dissatisfaction than all the other agencies. If you see anything in them that’s ‘true’, begin to doubt it at once.”

Sir William Osler, Canadian physician (1849-1919)

Journalist bashing

“Be careful about reading health books.
You may die of a mis-print.”

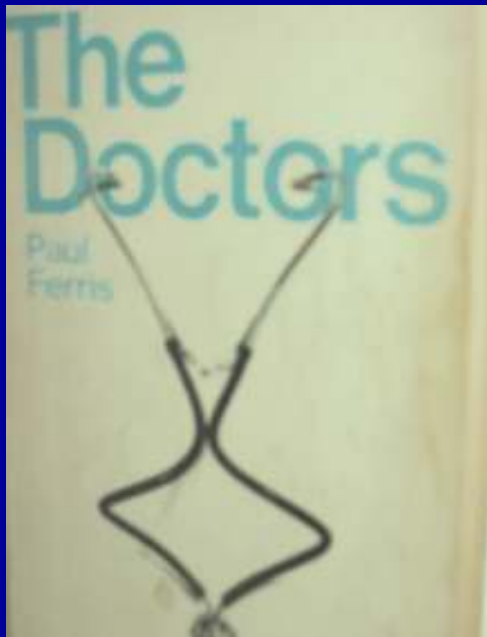
Mark Twain (1835-1910)

**AND YOU THINK
YOU HAVE AN
IMAGE PROBLEM.....**

GP public image

- *May be down by a few percentage points*
- *Still good, but no longer too good to be true (which arguably it was for far too long)*
- *The media reflects this (??)*

Age of deference



“Doctors in Britain...expect to be respected, and after spending a day in hospital as a reporter, wearing a white coat and being mistaken for a doctor by nurses and doctors, you have an inkling of how agreeable it must be to have deference on tap..”

The Doctors. Paul Ferris. Pelican (1964) Five shillings

The last 60 years

- Great expectations: old and new
- Chronic v acute/infectious disease
- Urbanisation
- Postcode prescribing
- The rise of consumerism
- Tyranny of choice
- Pick'n'mix medical culture
- Changing doctor-patient relationship
- Internet medicine
- Medical spin doctoring

Urbanisation

“A great number of people have lost their roots and connections and large families with their complex and intimate interrelations are beginning to disappear. The individual has become more solitary and even lonely. If in trouble he has hardly anyone to go for advice.... one of the possible outlets is to drop in on one’s doctor and complain.”

Balint M (1955) The doctor, the patient and his illness. The Lancet 1 283

Spin doctor: the Kildare prescription

The AMA's role in promoting the doctor hero. He should **not**: -

- drive a flashy car
- stop at a bar after a hard day
- be charged with medical malpractice

The AMA allegedly actively promoted TV images “that hyped high-tech, speciality-orientated, high cost care”

Source :Turow J (1989) Playing Doctor Television, Storytelling and Medical Power. OUP

Dr Kildare (1961-1966):

- Richard Chamberlain
 - Prime time physician
 - Heart throb actor
- Unwitting
propaganda agent of
the AMA (?)



“The Marcus Welby syndrome”

“By the 1970s, TV and reality had grown further apart. At a time of rising costs and specialization, real-life doctors feared the ‘Marcus Welby Syndrome’. They were expected to measure up to Robert Young, who as Dr Welby, was even more knowledgeable than he had been on ‘Father Knows Best’.”

Caryn James. New York Times. March 25, 1989



Health warning: spin-doctoring can seriously damage your health

“We build them up and then
we knock them down”

*Daily Mail reporter in
conversation with JI in 1988*



Emergency Ward 10
ATV
1956-1967

Britain's first TV
soap opera set
in the workplace

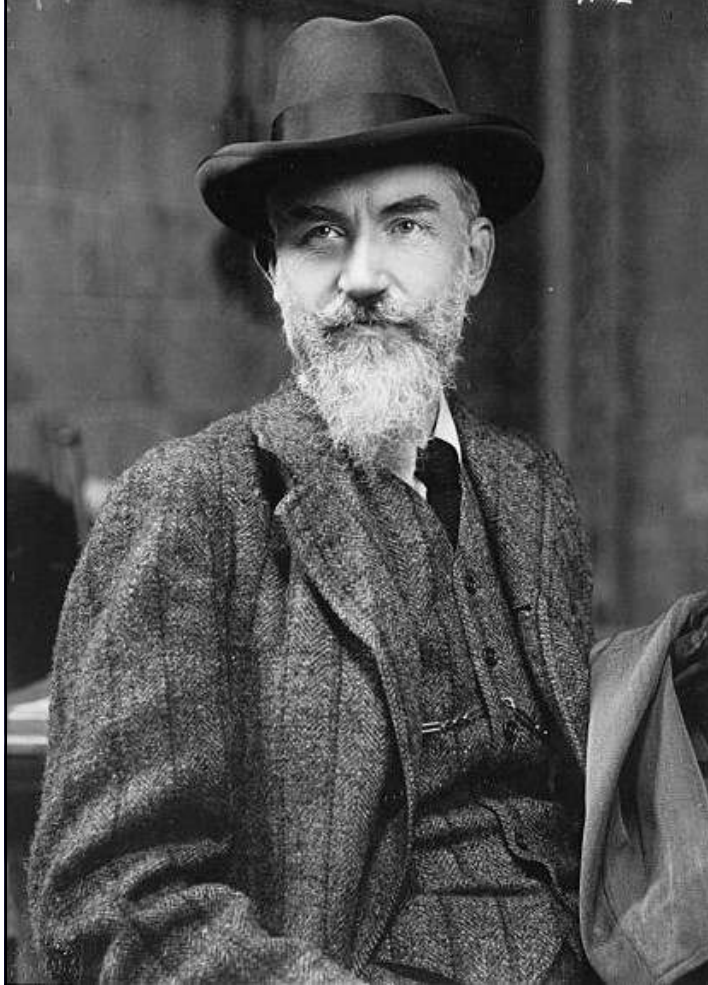




4077TH

M*A*S*H

4077TH



George Bernard Shaw
(1856-1950)
Irish playwright

The Doctor's Dilemma

“.....the medical profession has not a high character; it has an infamous character.....practises the most revolting cruelties in the pursuit of knowledge....”

Preface on Doctors. The Doctor's Dilemma. First produced in London in 1906.

Telling the truth

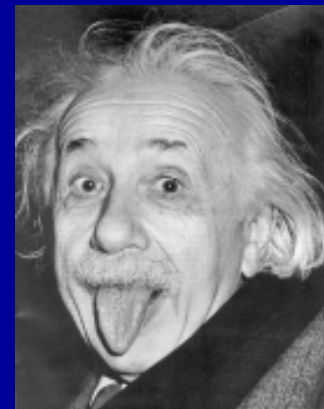
Bad journalism

Poor communication

Communication

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

Albert Einstein (1879-1955), Nobel Prize winner



Sloppy editing

“Churnalism”

Hyping

Lying

Death of a nurse in a hospice

David Cameron v Alan Johnson

Daily Telegraph Thursday, October 2, 2008

Fraud

Fraud

- Inventing entire experiments
- Inventing data
- Altering data
- Suppressing inconvenient data
- Suppressing unwelcome projects

Source: Fraud and Misconduct. 2nd edition.

Edited by Stephen Lock and Frank Wells

293pp

Shroud waving

“ When the geriatricians tell me they need more money, I take no notice. When the geriatricians tell me the paediatricians need more money, I’m all ears.”

Enoch Powell, former Health Minister, in conversation with JI for GP

The numbers game

- You may be impressed to read that a new treatment cuts the risk of heart attack by one in three
- You may change your mind if you were to discover that the risk was rather low in the first place – if, for example, the reduction in risk was from only three to two per cent
- No percentage means anything unless you know the base figure on which the percentage was calculated.

Fashion: 1958-2008

- Bland diets used to be in vogue
- Bed rest used to be the fashionable way to treat heart attacks
- Sexual intercourse for pregnant women used to be contraindicated.

Uncertainty

“ 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.

Using the media

The communications goal

What quote do I want to see in
tomorrow's paper or hear on
radio or TV?

(20-30 words or so)

Effective communication

‘I have only made this letter longer because I have not had the time to make it shorter.’

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) French scientist and mathematician

Effective communication

Less is

more

The pinprick factor



JIC news “values” scale

- Novelty
- Universality
- Topicality
- Impact
- Controversy



Your story

- Novelty ?
- Universality ?
- Topicality ?
- Impact ?
- Controversy ?

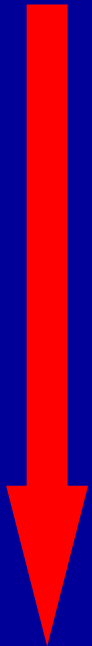
What's in it for.... ..?

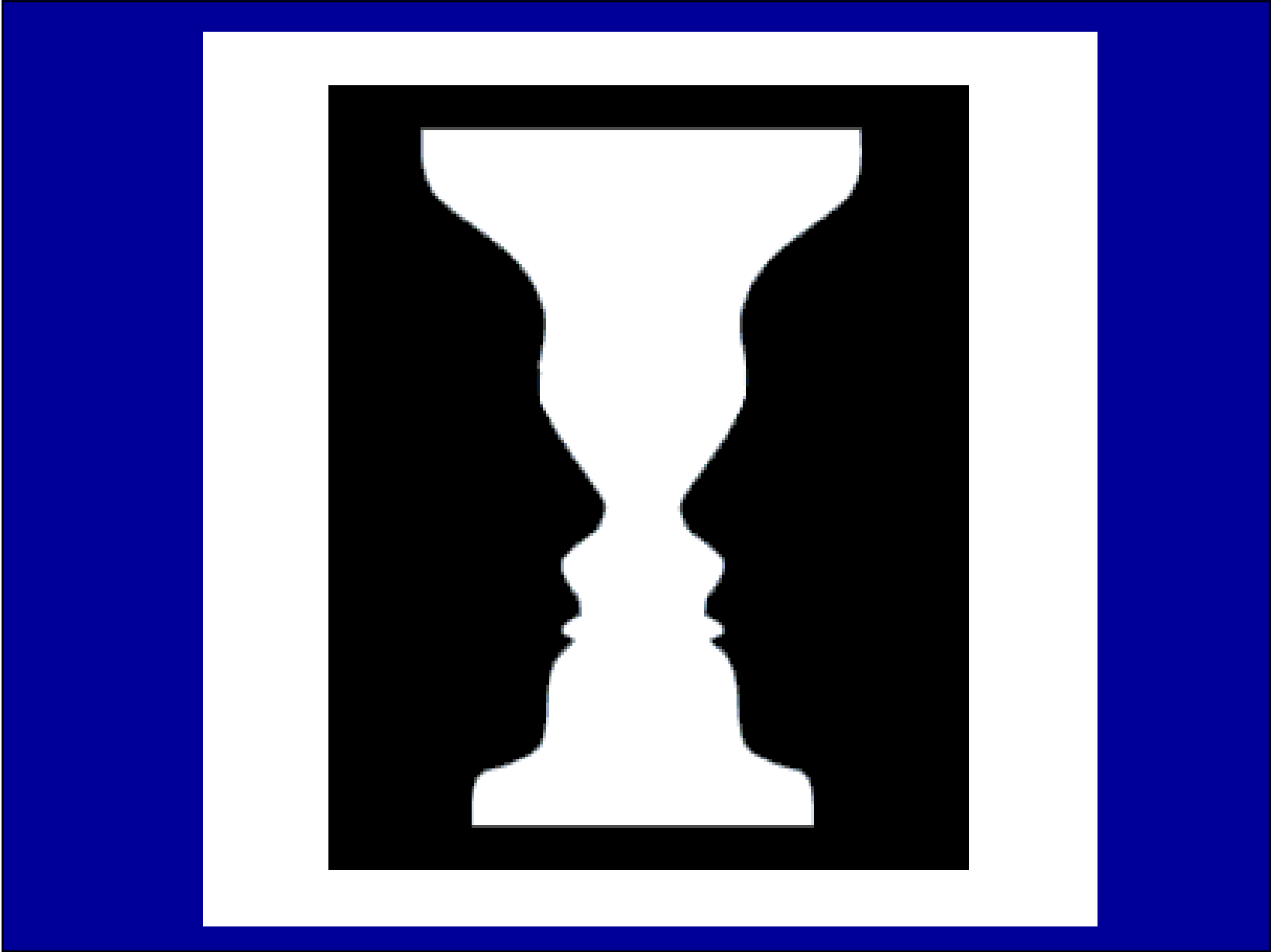
Sub-standard

Gold standard

Me?

Audience





The ABC of communication

- Acknowledge
- Bridge
- Communicate



Bridging

“I do agree with you, but the point I’d like to make is.....”

“That’s a very good point, but can I just say that.....”

“I’m very glad you raised that issue. It’s very important and it gives me the chance to....”



Body language

- Words: 10%
- Tone: 35%
- Non-verbal behaviour 55%

Conclusion

- Doctor bashing
- Telling “the truth”
- Using the media