

MEDIA RELATIONS

CHILD ABUSE AND THE MEDIA: TWELVE TIPS FOR DEALING WITH THE PRESS

—by Deborah Fisher

You're asked to be on a television talk show to discuss child abuse. Maybe it's a talkshow in your town. Maybe it's *Donahue*. You assume the program will include people who disagree with your point of view. You're right. You also assume that the host will know something about child abuse. You're wrong. The show is a disaster. You argue that many children are not protected from child abuse. Others on the show refute your claims by saying they've been falsely accused of abuse. The host seems to think one of you will emerge victorious by the end of the show if he just lets you battle it out. He doesn't guide the discussion or ask the right follow-up questions. When you try to elaborate on an important point, the host takes a commercial break. You end up feeling you could have accomplished a lot more back at the office.

What Watergate did to politics, McMartin did to child abuse. Suddenly, the topic was hot, or what reporters call "sexy." "Sexy" means it has momentum or, in the parlance of convention politics, the "Big Mo." The story the reporter has is bigger than what anyone else has. Preferably, it'll be the first. And the more aberrant, the better.

One problem most reporters have, though, is that they are generalists. When the McMartin story hit the wires, suddenly reporters were trying to understand a highly complex and deeply emotional topic—on deadline. In the rush to be topical, reporters made mistakes, mistakes that were devastating. In the aftermath of coverage about the McMartin case, the Jordan, Minnesota case, and similar cases, the press went through the throes of self-examination, discovering and admitting errors in reporting along the way. But the press has yet to find an effective way of retracting those errors. In fact, the press is still searching for a way to cover these stories adequately at all.

On the whole, reporters are trained to believe that they are on a mission from on high. Whether initiated in the classroom or in the newsroom, every reporter, no matter how small the small-town weekly, has a sense of defending the First Amendment. In the most positive sense, reporters believe they are representing the interests of all the people in their community when they step into a courtroom or city council meeting to get their stories.

But there is sometimes a fine line between a sense of duty and a sense of arrogance in the press. Because reporters are protected by the Constitution, they sometimes feel that they're shielded from being held accountable for their mistakes. And many pressures, both personal and institutional, can lead a reporter to make mistakes.

What shapes the daily news.

Consider reporters' boredom the number one influence on daily news. Journalists are constantly subjected to an intense level of interaction with newsworthy subjects. They know the politics of the city council intimately. They've heard the Governor speak a million times. Eventually, reporters become saturated with facts about topics they cover with any regularity. The boredom of the press led to the extremely poor coverage of the McMartin case in the latter stages of the trial. Reporters rarely cover a trial that lasts two weeks, let alone one that lasts two years.

Consider deadlines the number two influence on daily news. A journalist can only manage so much information in one day. If the press conference occurs at 3 p.m. and the news goes on the air at 5:00, a reporter has very little time to research in depth. And, unless the story has a wrinkle in it that makes it possible to "advance" it the

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next day with new information, it's dead by 11 p.m. In the rush toward deadlines, reporters are sometimes prone to finesse the facts. Stories are only as good as the sources who fill them, and who is talking makes a big difference in how a story sounds. In her critique of McMartin coverage, entitled "Flip Flop," Mary A. Fischer wrote in the December, 1988 issue of *Los Angeles* magazine that the primary influence in the earliest days of the story's release was that the prosecutor's office was talking and the defense attorneys were not.

The personality and taste of an individual reporter can have a lot to do with what shapes a story as well. Sometimes, stories get covered because reporters are interested in them. That can lead to good coverage, because an interested reporter often knows his or her material. But it can also make it hard sometimes to separate the reporter from the reporting. An unwritten rule that most reporters live by is to remain free of any conflicts or even the appearance of any conflicts of interest. But interest in a topic can very easily become special interest in one side of a topic, and readers are naturally suspicious when unexpected ties are revealed. Many were concerned, for example, when David Rosenzweig, former Metro editor of the *LA Times* who supervised the McMartin coverage for a time, became engaged to Lael Rubin, who prosecuted the case.

Most consumers of news are aware of the foibles of individual reporters. But many people don't consider that news is very much influenced by which side of the bed a reporter's editor got up on. The news can be shaped by the most pedestrian sense of what's important, or by what the local newspaper already covered that morning. Four or five different reporters may be rotated through a single trial, with each one handing off yesterday's summary like a relay race. A reporter prepared to cover a news conference on important changes in the state's juvenile code may be called off by an incompetent editor to do an obituary instead. I covered one civil trial in Federal court involving a man suing his family for having him kidnapped to be "deprogrammed" from a religious cult. One day the editors of a local wire service threw in a sports reporter to cover the day's proceedings.

Each day's stories are further subject to the competitive lineup of news produced by the elements and the unexpected. A story planned for weeks in advance falls without a bang or even a whimper when something urgent or new supersedes it. In the three years I covered the Jordan, Minnesota case, I often argued with my editor over what to cover. Most frequently, he argued on behalf of the people he thought were bored out of their minds with child abuse stories. I argued on behalf of those who weren't.

While you can't control most of the variables that determine what gets covered and how well, you can do some things to ease your relations with the press. First of all, *have* a relationship with the press. This is not something you are *required* to do. I think it's healthy for reporters to be reminded once in awhile that no Constitutional mandate insists that everyone answer their questions. But there are advantages to having good relations with the media. Reporters are much more willing to entertain story ideas from someone with whom they have an ongoing, friendly relationship.

Secondly, accept the media as a wild card. While you may be able to predict some coverage based on positive, working relationships with some reporters, accept the fact that you cannot control the press. You can avoid talking to them if you wish, but then you run the risk of not having your point of view expressed at all.

Tips for Dealing with the Press

1. Know how reporters in your area work. You often ask them to understand your world. Learn a little bit about theirs.
2. Respect a reporter's deadlines. Call with timely information well in advance.
3. Talk simply, not in professional jargon. This doesn't mean talk down to reporters. Give them the basics in plain language, and let them ask questions.
4. Don't push a story. Suggest. Send information. Make yourself available. Argue passionately, but don't shove. The press is suspicious of stories it doesn't find itself.

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MEDICINE

ASSESSMENT OF SUSPICIOUS BURN INJURIES

—by Seth Asser

Associate Editor's Note:

This couplet of articles by Dr. Seth Asser and Investigator Phylip Peltier provides insight into current practice in the medical evaluation of suspicious burns and articulates the importance of crime scene investigation. The pair highlights the need for a multidisciplinary approach to child maltreatment. — by Martin Finkel, DO

At least 6 to 15 percent of burned children seen as outpatients and one third of those hospitalized were injured as a result of abuse or neglect. It is therefore essential for anyone caring for injured children to be aware of the signs of non-accidental burns.

The biomechanics of burn injury are readily understood. Energy applied to skin causes direct cell damage or cell death. In almost all burns in the high-risk group—children under five years of age—injury is caused by thermal energy, or heat. The severity of thermal burns is a function of the amount of heat applied to the skin, the duration of exposure, and the thickness of the skin. At 156 F or above, it takes less than one second to produce a full-thickness burn. At the temperature of an average home water heater, 140 F, 5-10 seconds is required. At 124 F, producing a full-thickness burn takes several minutes. Heated metal objects, open flames, or grease—all of which have very high heat content—are damaging on very brief contact. Thick skin—such as that on the soles of the feet—takes longer to burn than thin skin.

In assessing the cause of burns, the two most important factors are the appearance of the injury and the plausibility of the history. **The injury**

The size, shape, depth, and distribution of the injury are telling. Some non-accidental injuries such as forced immersion scalds produce burns with easily recognizable fea-

tures. Forced immersion injuries produce circumferential injury around the extremities, often in "stocking" or "glove" distribution. Forced immersion burns are also seen on the buttocks, lower back, and perineum. These burns are nearly uniform in depth with sharp lines of demarcation. Occasionally there is an area of sparing of the buttock or sole of the feet, where a child is forcibly held down against the tub or sink. Such patterns suggest restriction of motion and significant exposure time. Adults, who have thicker skin and may wear protective clothing, almost always escape injury during forced immersions. Thus, absence of concurrent burn of the caregiver does not exclude involvement.

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Cigarette burns also produce easily recognizable features. They tend to be round, of varying depths, and in clusters, often on the hands or feet. Blistering seen early in cigarette burn injuries is sometimes confused with bullous impetigo, and vice-versa. Cigarette burns can be distinguished by their varying depth and by their characteristic pattern upon healing, namely round craters with hyperpigmented edges.

In burns from hot objects, the injury often closely resembles the object. Very hot objects such as household steam irons may produce a significant injury from a brief accidental touch. Suspicious injuries include very discrete lesions (especially in clusters), and burns in unusual locations such as the antecubital fossa or buttocks.

Some burn patterns are usually accidental. In the pull-down of hot liquid from a stove or table top, burns are predominantly on the head and trunk and have the characteristic "arrow down" pattern where the injury narrows as the liquid trails over the surface.

The history

Determining if the history is plausible requires an understanding of child development, knowledge of burn pathophysiology, and application of common sense. A good history includes a detailed description of events with exact location of people, furniture, appliances, and other features of the room. The story should be assessed with the age and specific abilities of the victim in mind. If the caretaker refers to what could be a trigger event, such as incessant crying or soiling, be alert for signs that the caregiver might have lost control and perpetrated physical abuse.

Assessment of child and caregivers for known risk factors for abuse may serve to identify those at high risk, but cannot alone be relied upon to make a diagnosis of non-accidental trauma. A scene review by an experienced investigator can prove invaluable, providing additional information such as the rate of rise and peak temperature of tap water. Paramedics responding to the scene often can provide details about the events and scene which caregivers might knowingly or inadvertently misreport. In addition, examination for evidence of concurrent and prior injury, including occult trauma, is essential in cases where reasonable suspicion exists. Injuries that appear old, e.g., have old, decomposing eschar or underlying cellulitis, need careful correlation with historical events as they may represent anything from inadequate medical care to attempts to hide abuse or neglect.

By careful assessment of injuries and a critical, reasoned approach to correlation with the history, one can identify injuries that are either non-accidental or at least suspicious enough to warrant further investigation. Children who receive non-accidental burn injuries—many of which are at least partially premeditated—are in a home environment that is seriously psychopathological. It is essential that suspicious injuries be referred for extensive investigation.

Seth Asser, MD, is Chief of Pediatric Critical Care at University of California, San Diego, Medical Center.

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5. Don't view the press as a vehicle for "public relations." PR is a dirty word to a working journalist. A reporter will accept PR material for background, but all PR is suspect, since it's created for whoever paid for it. When you have a story to suggest, shape it in terms of what's called a "hard news peg." What is important and timely about the story? What is the conflict? What is the resolution to a problem? What are the main elements of who, what, when, where, and how?
6. Never, under any circumstances, lie to a reporter.
7. Avoid the use of "no comment" whenever possible. If you feel you must not comment on a story, give a short explanation

- why, such as, "Not until the trial is finished," or be honest and say, "I don't trust your reporting."
8. Cultivate good working relationships with reporters over time. This doesn't necessarily mean trumping up excuses to chat with reporters or trying to be buddy-buddy. Be available. Respond to requests for information in a timely fashion. In short, be reliable when called upon.
9. Don't be afraid to ask questions of the reporter asking questions of you. Most reporters don't have a problem with giving you some idea what their story is about so you have a feel for the broader context in which your comments will be displayed.

10. Exercise your rights to object to mistakes or just plain bad coverage.
11. Leap to ask for corrections *immediately*. Do not form a committee to study the problem and then ask for a correction. Your only hope of getting a correction is to be timely and, in the case of letters to the editor, succinct.
12. Have a "fire brigade" formed and standing by. Judges in Washington state have a small committee that is on call to deal with media problems on behalf of their colleagues. They are ready to handle what's recommended in suggestion #11.

Deborah Fisher is a writer and consultant in Issaquah, Washington, and former legal affairs reporter for Minnesota Public Radio.