

BRITISH JOURNAL OF
**HOSPITAL
MEDICINE****MMC**
Modernising Medical Careers**MODERNISING
MEDICAL CAREERS****Managing the media 1:
a guide for
the foundation year doctor** **M98***Rachel Hooke***The clinical anatomy of
pericardiocentesis** **M100***Harold Ellis***Radiology of acute
ankle injuries** **M102***AD Gummow, SHM Khan***Patient confidentiality** **M105***Michael Keegan, Ros Levenson***Initial management of
acute trauma** **M108***Ammar Naser, Robert CM Stephens,**Rita Das***So you want to be ...
a plastic surgeon** **M112***Jatin R Joshi, Bran Sivakumar***IN NEXT MONTH'S
MMC SUPPLEMENT****The applied anatomy of
appendicectomy****Radiology of acute shoulder injuries****So you want to be...
a rheumatologist**

Managing the media 1: a guide for the foundation year doctor

Introduction

At some point, a journalist may approach you, or you may contact the media yourself. This could be the medical or lay press. You could be:

- Interviewed on radio or television
- Interviewed for a newspaper or magazine
- Writing to or for a newspaper, magazine, journal or book yourself
- Writing on a message board with press access.

This will be covered in two parts. This article will deal with being interviewed on the radio. A subsequent article will emphasize other aspects.

Radio etiquette

Being interviewed on the radio sounds very glamorous and, indeed, it can be. With these tips, you can enhance your experience and be prepared for what you are put through.

Obviously, you will want to know what the subject is before you agree. You may have to obtain permission from your trust's communications office first and you should speak to them anyway. They are usually reasonable and friendly people and will not put unnecessary obstacles in your way. If they try to insist that your clinical director or specialty manager speaks on your behalf, do not be fobbed off. Explain calmly that these staff may not understand all the nuances of the issues in question from a foundation doctor's point of view. This is your piece, so insist that you are the expert on the issue.

Try to ask beforehand for the questions likely to be put to you. This is no guarantee that they will be kept to, and you should not expect this, as broadcasters like spontaneity. However, it gives you some guidance and helps you formulate some coherent thoughts. You should be pre-

pared to speak on areas other than those covered by the list of questions. Find out whether the programme is going out live or if it will be pre-recorded, when you will be needed and the expected duration. It is useful to know if anyone else is also being interviewed – if so you may want to speak to them beforehand.

If you have a choice, decide whether to go to the radio station in person or to have the interview conducted by telephone. It depends on geography – if it is local radio, or if you are near a national headquarters, it may be easier to go to the station. It also depends on whether you are on call, on a normal working day or off duty at the time. If you choose to go there, the interview may seem more real in the actual studio, and you will be able to face your interviewer and take cues from his/her facial expressions and body language. On the other hand, this may make you more nervous.

Obviously, it does not matter how you dress for radio as you will not be seen by the audience. However, you should wear something that makes you feel relaxed and ready. Casual clothes may be physically comfortable. On the other hand, a suit may make you feel more professional. If you have come from work and/or are going there afterwards, you will need to be in your usual work clothes, unless you normally change into scrubs. If you are actually attending the radio station, you will want to create a good impression, and you need to use your own judgement.

The producer should be welcoming and put you at your ease. If you can, arrive early and get him/her to show you round, including seeing into the room where you are going to be. You will not hear what is being said because of the soundproofing, but you will get the idea. Once ensconced in your chair, you will be given a pair of headphones to wear.

If undertaking the interview over the phone, check what the procedure is, when you will be rung and how you will know when you are on air. Be ready beside your landline or extension, or with your mobile telephone to hand.

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Try to pitch your voice low, but without sounding monotonous. Avoid 'Australian Question Intonation' (where your voice is raised at the end of a sentence) because many listeners find it irritating. If you can, speak slowly and do not be afraid to pause at times. You may find that you are thrown off balance by the first question, particularly if you had obtained a list that was completely different. As mentioned above, radio staff prefer interviewees not to sound too scripted. Some questions may seem completely 'off the wall' – again, do not be daunted by this.

It may be tempting to rant, particularly if the topic is one you feel strongly about. This may or may not be appropriate. However, the most compelling points are often conveyed in the most matter-of-fact and neutral-sounding way. Listen to how other people in the spotlight describe with amazing dignity something that affects them deeply.

Do not be tempted to criticize your hospital, no matter how strongly you feel. If you are really compelled to speak out about appalling conditions, make sure your trust cannot be identified and that you cannot necessarily be associated with it. If asked if

your hospital can be named, and even shamed, you may prefer it not to be. This gives you more freedom to express your own opinions. If you live in a different town from your place of work, make sure nobody could accuse you of referring to the local hospital where you reside. Even if you are not directly disparaging, be aware that if you are identified with your hospital and say something contentious, your employers could take a dim view. Your trust will be unimpressed if your views reflect adversely on them, no matter how true they may be. You need to be careful about reporting controversies specific to your organization.

Above all, enjoy your brief moment of fame. It will be over surprisingly quickly. If it goes well, it will do wonders for your confidence. If it goes badly, you can just

contemplate philosophically that you are possibly not cut out for the media. However, do not be put off altogether. You can also name drop about your time on the show when the presenter is on air or mentioned in future. You can also put the experience on your curriculum vitae.

Conclusions

Check with your employer's communications department before speaking on radio. Do not criticize any particular hospital, nor sound as if you are. Keep your voice low and slow and do not be put off by difficult questions. Enjoy the experience. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: Dr Hooke has worked in both management and medicine. Her views are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of her employer or any other organization that she is associated with.

KEY POINTS

- Consult your employer's communications department before going on air.
- Check the exact arrangements with radio staff.
- Do not criticize your hospital.
- Speak slowly at a low pitch.
- Enjoy the experience.