

## Exposed!

Created 1 Oct 2003 - 12:00am

At the risk of being accused of gratuitous publicity-seeking, I am writing about my experiences with the mainstream media over the past month as I went on the publicity trail to promote my recently-released book, *Positive*.

I have had numerous experiences with the media over the years in my various spokesperson's roles with PLWHA organisations, but none have been so intense as the last few weeks of TV, radio and newspaper journalism.

Things have changed considerably since the days when a TV news reporter in Melbourne tricked me into appearing to play the 'victim' role for an item on euthanasia. This happened in the late nineties and the Northern Territory's euthanasia laws were about to be repealed.

The reporter, Nicole, from Channel Seven, wanted a person with AIDS to put the case for euthanasia, to argue that the repeal was a bad idea. I was happy to do this but not at all happy when I saw the edited interview: instead of using my reasoned arguments, she plucked out something I said about how difficult it was to live with some of the debilitating AIDS conditions to make it appear like I was going through these end-stage illnesses myself.

The cameraman made me walk up a hill so I was out of breath and looked as if I was struggling to walk. When the footage was shown on the evening news, I had alarmed calls from friends and family who were wondering if I had suddenly taken a turn for the worse.

Nothing so spectacularly manipulative happened on my publicity tour of Sydney and Newcastle in mid-August but I did encounter a few challenges as well as some excellent journalists. First stop was Sky Health News in some very difficult-to-find studio at French's Forest on Sydney's North Shore. The Producer, another Nicole, has read the book (past the first hurdle) but she has a cold and can't do the interview: a replacement (whose name I forget and who hasn't read the book) is pulled in at the last minute to do the ten-minute segment.

Things are going OK as my (very) blond, suntanned interviewer gets into her prepared questions. And then: "So I gather you are celibate these days, being HIV-positive?"

"Ah, no," I say, "that was true for a period of my life after my diagnosis but I now feel it's important that HIV-positive people have love and intimacy like everyone else."

My interviewer is noticeably shocked and almost loses her place on the question sheet. I know it's partly because she has got the information wrong but I wonder if I have crossed a taboo for middle Australia, broaching the concept of HIV-positive people having sex on a cable TV news channel.

Day two involves a trip to Newcastle, where NBN TV, to its credit, has been one of the few commercial channels willing to do an interview about my book. I am on the Today show (run against Bert Newton in the mornings) and am being interviewed by Nat Jeffrey in between the segments of hairstyling tips and the latest ideas in knitting. Nat is a health nut, it's fair to say, who has lots of ideas about natural therapies. In between takes (it takes three to get our interview right) Nat grills me with his ideas about cures for AIDS.

Zinc, he reckons, is an underrated supplement for wasting diseases and has been used very successfully with girls with anorexia nervosa. I try to point out that AIDS is caused by a [virus](#) [1]A small infective organism which is incapable of reproducing outside a host cell. not a psychological phenomenon but Nat continues with his theories. He thinks that there are many unexplored natural therapies out there that can cure AIDS; it's just that people haven't got the dosages right yet. I tell him that I have had a millionaire friend who spent a fortune trying to find the natural answer to AIDS but who, sadly, is no longer with us. It is hard to have this conversation and then go back into the glare of the studio lights but that's daytime variety television for you — or at least my experience of it.

I have a delightful interview with Felicity Biggins on the University of Newcastle's community radio station, 2NUR. Felicity has very good friend with AIDS and I can see her grasp of the issues and her genuine empathy with my book is going to make this interview a dream. In contrast to my blond friend from Sky News, she pushes the envelope on the issues for positive people having sex and relationships. We talk about the difficulties around

disclosure, sex and rejection for positive partners, and about some of the pressures that I've felt trying to have relationships with negative partners over the years. After the interview is over she tells me that she felt she had to draw the line at talking about 'bug chasing' and the debates on barebacking that I discuss in the book. She doesn't want me to think she was censoring the discussion, but rather such a complex issue could easily be taken out of context by some listeners, perhaps leading to unfair generalisations about people with HIV/AIDS. A fair assessment, I thought.

Next stop, the ABC. Thank God for Aunty. I have been given an incredible run on ABC radio, being interviewed four times in all about my book. Today I am being shown into the bizarrely named 'Tardis' radio booth at 2NC Newcastle to do two interviews: one with Garth Russell for 2NC and one with Andrea Close for 2CN Canberra.

Andrea is first and she stuns me with her zeal for the topic. It's a pleasure to be interviewed by someone who knows her trade, who follows every lead in the conversation as far as she can, who elicits the very best she can out of her interviewees. She asks me in detail about the experience of having AIDS illnesses, what it is like taking all those pills every day, how my family took the news and so on. She tries to draw out the difference between having

I am exhausted as I go straight into Garth in the studio next door. His is supportive but it is a considerably more general interview: I wonder whether Garth has had time to read my book, after all.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* is also very supportive, printing an interview with journalist Tony Stephens in their features section during the week and a review by Steve Dow in the Saturday paper. I am very pleased with both although Stephens has gone a little far with his reportage for my liking. He has mentioned something about the graves of positive people in my home town which I'd preferred he hadn't.

It's my own fault. I have to remember that unless you clearly state "This is off the record," you can be sure most reporters will print the most sensational titbits you give them. Stephens is an older guy, maybe in his late fifties, who seems to have little familiarity with HIV/AIDS or gay men, but he made a good fist of the issues, explaining the significance of T-cells and drug [resistance](#) [2]HIV which has mutated and is less susceptible to the effects of one or more anti-HIV drugs is said to be resistant. to his readers. He asks me to find out the specific numbers of increases in HIV infections in NSW and Australia last year so that he gets his facts right.

I am chuffed to find that the Sunday Telegraph in Sydney and the Herald-Sun in Melbourne, both widely-read mainstream tabloids, have printed a short review and cover shot of my book. I am not being shunned by the popular press, despite the subject matter. My tome about a once-sensational disease, an account that includes discussions of gay sex in backrooms and nearly being arrested in a beat, has been accepted enough by the mainstream to be reviewed and included in their weekend reading supplements. I even crack a mention in *The Bulletin* in an article by Steve Dow on rising HIV transmissions.

The best and the most analytical reviews are in the gay press, as I would have hoped. I am particularly delighted with Tim Benzie's review in the *Sydney Star Observer* where he states that my writing, particularly about what it's like to be HIV-positive these days "liberated from the necessary doublespeak of AIDS councils, is rare and should be cherished." There have been other reviews in the gay and HIV press and community radio interviews. To my amazement they have all been favourable; I can't say I haven't had fair and supportive coverage from my own community.

As a first-time book author (who has not seen any sales figures yet) I cannot really give any budding writers out there much advice on how to publicise a book if you manage to produce one, but I can say that the climate out there for stories about AIDS (and I think, by extension, for stories about gay men — as my story was as much about my sexuality as about HIV) is reasonably supportive. My publicity jaunt showed that there is still a level of interest, even fascination, with the subject. What many of us with HIV regard as a humdrum part of our existence, coping with this disease, is not so boring for people who have little experience of the virus or people living with it. If you think you've got a book in you, then go for it. It is likely that you would have to be open about your status though — my publishing contract clearly stated that I had to be available for interviews and any publicity opportunities, as (I was told) you need to put a face or a voice to the text to really sell a book.

*\*David Menadue\* is the President of NAPWA; the views expressed in this article are his own and do not necessarily represent the views of NAPWA.*

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**Links:**

[1] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/125>

[2] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/109>