

CHAMP: a novel collaboration between public health and the media

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Crikey, an electronic news bulletin sent to subscribers each weekday, was established in 2000, and explores and develops innovative methods of news gathering (<http://www.crikey.com.au/>). Although the readership (around 30 000) is small compared with mainstream media, it is increasing. The readership is also influential, and includes journalists, bureaucrats and political staffers.

In April 2007, three of us (SC, MAS and RNM) approached Crikey, proposing to establish the Crikey Health and Medical Panel (CHAMP), whose members would be encouraged to contribute articles and tips to Crikey. Our goals included: developing a mechanism for encouraging greater breadth and depth of public debate about health issues; encouraging and facilitating public health advocates to engage in public debate; and influencing media reporting of health issues. Crikey's independent critique of the media industry matches our interest in critiquing media coverage of health. CHAMP fits with Crikey's view of how the media might operate as a direct conduit between news source and reader, bypassing the intervention of a journalistic intermediary.

How CHAMP works

CHAMP now has over 120 members, including public health advocates, clinicians, academics, bureaucrats, consumers, and media and public relations professionals. Members have diverse expertise and experience, but generally have two things in common: a commitment to public good and a belief in the value of open, frank and informed public debate. Crikey is committed to vigorous, pluralistic debate, and articles by CHAMP members have, at times, been critical of other members or articles.^{1,2}

The project coordinator (MAS) regularly emails members, asking for articles and tips for articles. If necessary (eg, due to time

ABSTRACT

- Crikey is a daily electronic bulletin aimed at providing independent news. It was established in 2000.
- In 2007, journalists and public health advocates collaborated with Crikey to initiate an innovative health reporting project, the Crikey Health and Medical Panel (CHAMP).
- CHAMP members contribute articles and news tips to Crikey, broadening Crikey's scope of public health coverage.
- CHAMP continues to evolve, and has expanded to include a freely accessible online health forum, Croakey.
- CHAMP was established to enhance public debate about health, to encourage public health advocates to engage in debate, and to help the media to identify public health advocates and issues as sources for articles.

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pressures), we provide help with writing or editing. Journalists associated with Crikey (RNM or MAS) often email CHAMP members for comment when researching a particular topic.

To extend the opportunity for debate about issues raised in Crikey health articles, an online health forum, Croakey (<http://www.crikey.com.au/blogs/croakey.html>), was established in April 2008. Shortened versions of Crikey health articles are posted on Croakey, often ending with questions to prompt feedback or discussion. One of us (MAS) usually emails CHAMP members and others who may be interested in a particular article, asking them to comment on the Croakey posting. This stimulates debate and ensures key health industry contacts are aware of relevant articles.

Croakey produces wide-ranging debates on topical issues, such as policy suggestions for the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission and the Australia 2020 Summit, analysis of the Northern Territory intervention, and media coverage of alcohol policy. Croakey is freely accessible and allows people to comment without declaring their full name or position, enabling contributions from people such as bureaucrats and others with organisational barriers that normally inhibit public comment. However, it also means that their interests are not always declared.

In November 2008, Croakey was relaunched as a group blog (web log) to broaden its scope and focus (<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/croakey/>). CHAMP members are invited to publish and comment on blog postings.

The role of CHAMP is evolving. Initially, the Panel was established as a source for articles, but it is also becoming a vehicle for their dissemination. Members receive a monthly compilation of Crikey health articles and a summary of debates at Croakey.

Impact of CHAMP

CHAMP has been productive, generating 234 articles on a range of topics (Box 1). Many of the articles relate to topics often under-reported by the general news media, such as Indigenous health, and many were of significant newsworthiness.^{3–6} From April 2008 to September 2008, 72 articles were posted on Croakey.

1 Topics covered by the Crikey Health and Medical Panel (CHAMP), 9 May 2007 to 23 September 2008

Fifty-seven CHAMP members generated 234 articles (38 articles were contributed by non-CHAMP members). Topics covered were:

- Health policy and health workforce issues (73)
- Pharmaceutical and industry marketing (33)
- Indigenous health and the Northern Territory intervention (29)
- Alcohol (16), illicit drugs (16), and tobacco (6)
- Obesity, food, physical activity (16)
- Media coverage of health (9)
- Rural and remote health (8)
- Mental health (8)
- Health and medical research (6)
- Cancer (5)
- Clinical issues (3)
- Abortion (2)
- Safety and quality of health care (2)
- Gun control (1)
- Asylum seekers (1)

2 Feedback from Crikey Health and Medical Panel (CHAMP) members

Dr Catriona Bonfiglioli, Lecturer, Media Studies, University of Technology, Sydney: "Crikey creates a conversation among people who may otherwise not network, and that has the potential to spur involvement in public policy and debate."

Professor Simon Chapman, Professor of Public Health, University of Sydney: "I was particularly interested in the responses that came in on the Howard Indigenous health 'blitz' in the [Northern Territory]. It seemed that Crikey was the main voice putting alternative views on the wisdom of what was happening. As a result of contributing Crikey articles, I have been threatened with a writ; done numerous media interviews; received many emails; and received both positive and negative feedback the next day via Crikey. I was told that one of my articles was used as reading material for a University course."

Professor Wayne Hall, Professor of Public Health Policy, University of Queensland: "I have followed the various pieces about health funding and health system reorganisation, some of which will probably find its way into my [Masters of Public Health] teaching on the Australian health system. Crikey has provided another way of accessing an educated public."

Mr Michael Johnston, Health Policy Officer, *Choice*: "The stories give me an understanding of what issues are important to different people and groups and what their views are on the issues of the day. I think Crikey is particularly useful for this because it publishes a much wider range of people than conventional media."

Professor Guy Maddern, Professor of Surgery, University of Adelaide: "The one article I contributed to Crikey ... had ... considerable feedback from a range of sources, including the state Minister for Health, colleagues I have not heard from in decades, and my local butcher! Indeed, the article led to a number of radio interviews and, I believe, gained useful and productive exposure to the issues that were

highlighted in it ... I have certainly believed that talking to the media and trying to inform the public of the issues and the complexities of problems of acute health care, particularly surgery, is an important role for surgeons to engage in. The advantage of the Crikey approach has been that one has been able to say precisely what one wishes to say without editorial interference. The only drawback, of course, is that one has to take complete responsibility for what one says ... As a university academic, there are fortunately no employment barriers to me talking to the media ... I would have to agree that [Crikey] has been valuable in providing a forum for health debate. Whether it influences policy I think remains to be seen."

Dr Sue Page, GP: "What I particularly liked was the way Crikey could respond rapidly, and also tolerate diversity of opinion."

Dr Jan Savage, Public Health Consultant, Victoria: "Anything that stimulates debate, reflection, analysis and questions is very important in Australia."

Mr Terry Slevin, Cancer Council of Australia: "Crikey has been important in tackling some of the more complex and challenging health stories in a more direct and at times confrontational manner than the mainstream, while also offering more critical analysis."

Mr Robert Wells, Co-Director, Menzies Centre for Health Policy; Executive Director, College of Medicine and Health Sciences, Australian National University: "I receive lots of general feedback from my former colleagues along the lines of 'keep up the good work; keep saying the sorts of things we would like to but cannot'. A lot of Canberra bureaucrats and government people read Crikey religiously."

Dr Alex Wodak, Director, Alcohol and Drug Service, St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney: "The media [have] more impact on health than all the stethoscopes in the world." ♦

Informal feedback from CHAMP members has been largely positive (Box 2). Members appreciate the opportunity to contribute to debate, and the access to an alternative media source. Many members who wrote articles have been contacted or interviewed by other media outlets. Some had feedback from colleagues, policymakers and the community. Time constraints remain a major barrier to more active engagement for many members.

The demise of traditional forms of news media has been widely predicted.⁷ Whether or not those predictions are realised, it is clear that traditional media will have fewer resources for investigating and covering important public health issues. New forms of media create opportunities for the development of alternative forums for debate about health issues and policy. CHAMP is one example of how the health sector can work with media professionals to develop a vehicle for discussion and debate.

In the "pond" of public debate, media coverage of health, and policy making, CHAMP is a small "pebble". But even the smallest pebble can create ripples.

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Competing interests

Melissa Sweet is paid for writing articles for Crikey and for coordinating CHAMP and Croakey. She holds honorary appointments at the School of Public Health, University of Sydney and at the School of Medicine, Notre Dame University (Sydney campus). Ray Moynihan is a regular contributor to Crikey.

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