

The Physician and the Press: What a Doctor Needs to Know about Talking with the Media

By Liz Rabiner Lippoff

When a reporter is talking with the aquarium's marine biologist about the health of the new baby whale, the audience sees the speaker as "the guy/woman from the aquarium" ... if the person's profession registers at all. Most people have little or no contact with marine biologists, no context from which to make judgments about veracity or reliability, and no need to remember the source so that they can better deal with their next marine biologist.

When a physician is interviewed, however, the audience – and the reporter – bring a lifetime of experience to bear as they listen and evaluate the information and the source.

In addition to learning and adhering to the guidelines for all media encounters, physicians should keep some key points in mind as they prepare for an interview.

People often see this specific physician as a representative of physicians in general.

- For better or worse, to a certain extent you represent all doctors when you appear in the media.

Their previous experience with other physicians can color the audience's impression of your appearance.

- If they have had good experiences with doctors, they are more likely to believe what they see now, and vice versa.
- If they are confused, offended, or otherwise negatively reactive to the doctor they see in an interview, it could negatively affect their future encounters with other physicians. And vice versa.

People expect their doctors to know more than they do about medical issues.

- The facts and opinions you choose to present are likely to stick with the audience, so you must choose them carefully and express them clearly.
- People expect and respect a certain amount of "medical lingo."
- On the other hand, the point of an interview is to communicate clearly, so physicians must take special care to speak in everyday language and to clearly define all medical terms.

It may help to remember that reporters are just employees with a deadline, and you are helping them do their job just as they are helping you communicate your information. If you think you may be working with the media, in general or on a specific story, and you are not sure you have the skills to handle it professionally, there are consultants who can help you refine your messages and, to be honest, rehearse your act. People come to you for help with their health; unless you took Media 101 in medical school, there's no shame in getting help with media relations.