

February 2002

Media Watch

with Mary Aspinwall

Since I last wrote there has been one minor and then one major media feeding frenzy that has touched on our little realm.

The first followed the death of an asthma sufferer, who had apparently been receiving homeopathic treatment. The story, which emerged at the inquest, was picked up by most Irish national papers. Their concerns, expressed here by The Irish Times, centred on the lack of regulation:

“In Co Mayo, Jacqueline Alderslade died after an asthmatic attack last July. It emerged at the inquest that she had written in her diary that a homeopath had told her to stop the medication for her condition, except for a Ventolin inhaler, while she tried the alternative treatment.

The homeopath, Mineke Kamper, who failed to attend the inquest, denied to gardai that she had taken Alderslade off the medication...

Experiences such as these highlight the urgent need for regulation of the alternative-healthcare sector, to protect not only consumers, but also responsible practitioners.

As a consumer, how do you know the person treating you alternatively is genuine? How do you know it's not just a lot of hot air?

...Some alternative practitioners belong to voluntary registers. The Irish Society of Homeopaths and the Irish Reflexologists' Institute are among those who are attempting to regulate their fields.

Lua McIlraith, who chairs the reflexology institute, wants statutory regulation to be introduced as soon as possible, so "we can be seen as upright, honest people who are not in the business of killing people". ”

The new PR sub committee did a good damage limitation job. In letters to all the papers they pointed out that Ms. Kamper was not known to the Society and that the Society was actively seeking statutory regulation of the profession to protect the public. Sally Quinlan went on national radio to reiterate this message. The frenzy was short-lived because the following day a major child prostitution scandal broke and this was immediately followed by the Budget. The inquest quickly became yesterday's news.

More recently, Breda Dooley (our PR consultant) contacted The Examiner's Feelgood supplement and they did a double page spread. One side focussing on the Irish Society's desire for statutory registration and the other interviewing John Files, a very obliging client of mine on his (and his family's) positive experience of being treated homeopathically.

These articles are very important if we are to maintain the, generally very positive, image the public has of Homeopathy.

The second frenzy is one that will run and run. The Daily Telegraph, noting Cherie Blair's sympathetic feelings towards things alternative, wondered (on December 11) whether Leo Blair, 18 months old, had received the combined measles, mumps and rubella vaccination. She and her husband refused to say yae or nae citing the little fellow's right to privacy.

Conservatives believed Cherie had given Leo single, rather than combined, vaccines, whilst on holiday in France. Some Tories sensed they were on to some classic Downing Street hypocrisy. The Mail on Sunday speculated that Cherie and Tony had been prejudiced against the jab due to a case of autism elsewhere in the extended Blair family.

Whilst the Department of Health spouted reassuring noises that MMR was entirely safe statistics showed that only 75% of children had received the MMR jab twice by the recommended age of five. This is 20% below the number needed for so-called 'herd' immunity.

On Sunday 3rd February BBC's Panorama ran a documentary called "MMR – Every Parent's Choice" which featured the latest research by scientists, including Andrew Wakefield. In the research Wakefield and his collaborators report that they have found the measles virus in 83% of gut samples from children with autism and bowels disorders but only in 7% of children without these conditions. Wakefield first publicly claimed MMR may not be safe in 1998, and recommended the use of single vaccines. Since he voiced these safety concerns the uptake of MMR has fallen dramatically.

He told *Panorama*: "You do not combine three live viruses into one vaccine and assume that it is a benign process. "These are viruses that are live, they are capable of establishing long term infection and they are capable of producing long-term adverse events."

Panorama invited people to post their comments on its website following the show. One of those who tried to do so was Magda Taylor, who has run a newsletter called The Informed Parent for many years.



Noting that many of the offerings posted were highly emotional she e-mailed a detailed summary of the arguments against vaccination including many rarely-quoted figures. Later she checked and they had been removed.

The following day, she contacted BBC Radio 5 Live's phone-in programme on MMR with Nicky Campbell. Despite her long experience in coherently arguing the demerits of vaccination she was not contacted at any stage during the programme. In contrast, Jackie Fletcher (who set up JABs following vaccine damage to her own son) was on the programme throughout. Jackie is an advocate of single vaccines.

It is curious that in this era of informed consent and seemingly open debate that some animals' airtime is more equal than others!

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