Disasters, journalists and journalism

Thank you everyone for coming along today, or for watching if you are off campus.

Today Cait McMahon, who runs the Australasian arm of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, and I are going to speak, from quite different perspectives, about the impact on journalists of covering trauma. At first glance this issue may not seem to have an obvious relationship to the public health field, but I hope that we can highlight some connections.

One of the connections that I thought might be relevant to the public health field is how an organisation like the Dart Centre, which initially arose out of concerns about the impact of media coverage on the victims of violence and trauma has evolved into an organisation which also focusses on the impact of journalists of covering trauma. What began as an organisation informed by mental health professionals and victims’ rights advocates is now an organisation largely run by journalists.

It sometimes seems to me that there are more groups and interests trying to influence media coverage of their pet issue than there are journalists. As a working journalist you come into contact with so many of these groups, often with completely unrealistic expectations of the media and little understanding of how the industry works, that you become quite cynical about their efforts.

One of the reasons I wanted to draw the Dart Center to your attention is because I have great respect for how it does so much more than trying to influence media coverage of its particular issue. It is much more credible and effective than many other groups because it works with and for journalists rather than on them. It’s a subtle but important distinction which has widespread relevance for the public health field. We learnt about the value of this sort of approach from AIDS, but it’s a lesson which seems to need continual re-stating, judging by the Federal Government’s recent intervention into NT Aboriginal communities.
I just want to give a brief introduction, to say a bit about how I came to be involved with the issue of journalism and trauma, and specifically the Dart Centre. Cait knows so much more about both these subjects than I do, so I will leave the bulk of the explaining to her.

I first came into contact with the Dart Centre as a result of my book, Inside Madness, about the life and death of murdered psychiatrist Dr Margaret Tobin.

When the book was published last year, I could hardly bring myself to look at it. This was more than my usual journalistic paranoia about discovering errors, omissions or sloppy writing. I couldn’t bear to look at the book because it was a reminder of so many traumas.

The most obvious of these is that Inside Madness is about a murder and its impact - not a pleasant subject for a long-term relationship. Indeed, it is the longevity of the relationships that you develop when researching a book that is both blessing and curse. Because you can spend so much time getting to know your subject, you hope to do a better job of researching and writing your story.

But you also become much more emotionally involved. In some senses, this is necessary and helpful. No-one in their right mind would volunteer the effort and time that a book devours without some sort of emotional stake.

But emotional engagement exacts costs, both personal and professional. Boundaries are inevitably transgressed. You come to know people so well that they are more than professional contacts, more than sources for your book. You are more aware than usual of the potential for your work to be hurtful.

So often in journalism, you mine someone’s story, package it up for retail, and then move onto the next subject, often in blissful ignorance of its impact upon the lives of those involved. With a book, it can be more difficult to remain oblivious and to move on.

As journalists, we often rationalise our intrusion into other peoples’ distress on the grounds that helping people to tell their stories will help their recovery, especially if it leads to action which stops other such suffering occurring. Often there is some truth in this. But sometimes we may be
exacerbating their distress by forcing them to relive traumatic events. Sometimes we are instruments of an industry which, it could be argued, mines and retails tragedy to its audiences. Sometimes the impact of telling peoples’ stories can be unpredictable and can have unforeseen consequences, both good and bad.

After many years of covering health and medical issues, I have come to the conclusion that patients rarely give true “informed consent” to have a medical procedure or intervention. Until they know what the surgeon’s blade or the physician’s pill means for them, they cannot fully appreciate the implications of their consent. The effects of medical interventions can be helpful and/or harmful, uncertain and can change with time.

So too does publication of a book also have a range of unpredictable effects for those involved. When you write a book like Inside Madness, revealing intimate details about people and families, you have to accept the uncomfortable reality that you may be adding to the grief and trauma of those who have already suffered huge losses.

When you spend months investigating someone’s life and work, as I did with Dr Tobin, many difficult questions arise. What is relevant; what is true; which memories are reliable and which are not? Am I being fair, too tough, not tough enough? What are the rights of the dead and the unrepresented? (Dr Tobin was obviously unable to give her perspectives and the family of the murderer, Eric Gassy, chose not to be interviewed).

It is a telling irony that the more time you have to research a topic, the more aware you become of the difficulties of ever knowing or reporting “the truth”. The deeper you delve, the more evident are the limitations of your trade. It can be hard enough to establish the facts of a situation given the utter unreliability of memory. Interpretations of peoples’ characters and motives is a minefield.

And it is difficult to examine other peoples’ lives in detail without also examining your own. As I learnt more about Dr Tobin’s complex and contradictory character - she once declared, for example, not to have a sentimental bone in her body and yet I learnt of many sentimental gestures - I also reflected upon my own contradictions and quirks, and wondered whether it is possible to try to know someone else if you don’t know something of yourself and your own biases.
Inside Madness is more than the story of a gutsy woman and a terrible tragedy. It also examines our society’s inability to provide decent care and support to those with mental illness. The book was part of my response to the death of my brother, who killed himself the year before Dr Tobin was murdered. Writing the book was part of my own search for understanding about my brother’s life and death, and it was often a painful therapy.

All of us are marked in some way by the work that we do. When researching the book I spent some months attending the trial of Eric Gassy, the deregistered psychiatrist who was eventually found guilty of murdering his former boss. During that time, a number of reporters told me of how their work in courts had adversely affected their own psychological well-being. Some had spent many weeks listening to the grisly details of the Snowtown murders, and this had left a profound mark.

All of this is to explain why bells rang when I saw an advertisement last year calling for applications for the 2006 Dart Ochberg Fellowship. Established by the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies and the Dart Center, the fellowship brings together a small group of journalists, mainly from the US, to discuss and learn about issues related to the coverage of violence and trauma, whether wars, disasters, crimes, illness or accidents. Within hours of learning I had won the fellowship, the 2005 Australian Fellow, ABC journalist Philip Williams, rang to say it was one of the best things he’d ever done as a journalist.

When I packed my bags to attend the fellowship in Hollywood last October, it was the emotional baggage which weighed heaviest. I was not only carrying a load from my book, but also despair at my industry’s direction, specifically the rise of celebrity and lifestyle journalism at the expense of investigative and humanitarian journalism, the boring predictability of so much coverage and commentary, the triumph of style over substance, the lack of authenticity in so much of what passes for public debate, the commercialisation of news values...and the list goes on.

Tinsel town is the last place where I would have expected to rediscover an enthusiasm for journalism. But that was the fellowship’s great gift, for me anyway. It brought together journalists and supported us to discuss our own work and issues, and to hear from experts about the impact of violence and
trauma, upon communities and individuals, as well as upon journalists who cover it.

Hearing about the work of the other Dart fellows reinvigorated my appreciation for what good journalism can achieve, often in the face of considerable resistance from inside and outside the newsroom. I was inspired by the news editor from Lafayette who pushed her small newspaper to cover the plight of prisoners in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. It was hard to imagine an Australian newspaper having the guts and compassion to cover such an unpopular subject as prisoner welfare, not only in such depth but also in a way which humanised prisoners. All of us were gob-smacked by the courage of the young journalist from Colombia whose reporting on paramilitary crimes had led to death threats, forcing her to leave her home and country.

It was moving to hear seasoned war reporters talk about their work and its impact, including their struggles with problems such as post traumatic stress disorder. It was a privilege to be amongst colleagues courageous enough to speak of their fears and frailties. It felt a million miles from the bravado and back stabbing which is so prevalent in many news rooms and which often impedes professional discussion and development.

I wonder whether some of these themes are ringing bells for those of you doing difficult jobs without much support, whether working in health services, organisations or bureaucracies. A related issue is the challenge of maintaining humanity and compassion - to not switch off when your daily grind involves a constant barrage of trauma and distress.

Another of the gifts of the Fellowship was the opportunity to meet some great characters, including Professor Frank Ochberg, a senior psychiatrist with a long interest in the impact of violence and trauma, who helped establish the Dart Center. He is also a former director of mental health in Michigan, held a senior position at the National Institutes of Mental Health, and has great enthusiasm and appreciation for the role and potential of journalism.

Other Dart characters include Bruce Shapiro, the Center’s executive director, a journalist and academic who has written about his own experiences as the victim of a random stabbing (and many of you may also know him as a regular guest of Phillip Adams on Radio National); Mark Brayne, a former
BBC foreign correspondent who retrained as a psychotherapist and now runs Dart in Europe where he works both with individual journalists and media organisations; and Cait, a psychologist who has previously worked as a counsellor at The Age, she is researching the impact of work-related trauma upon journalists, including whether it can precipitate personal growth.

The Australasian branch of Dart has run training sessions for journalists from Australia, Indonesia and East Timor since its 2004 launch. Cait says it is helping to overcome the journalistic taboo against discussing professional traumas: “In tough cultures you don’t show weakness and to have any sort of psychological or emotional reaction is often misunderstood as a weakness when it’s not. It’s purely about being human.”

Becoming involved with the Dart fellowship provided me with some much-needed therapy, not only for dealing with the aftermath of Inside Madness but also for recharging a belief that good journalism matters.

Finally, before handing over to Cait, I would like to conclude with two book recommendations for anyone interested in such issues.

“Bearing Witness: The Lives of War Correspondents and Photojournalists” by Denise Leith - series of interviews with “people who have spent their careers looking at what others cannot bear to see”.

and

A book by another journalist involved with Dart, Kimina Lyall, former southeast Asian correspondent of The Australian. “Out of the Blue: Facing the Tsunami.” I commend it to anyone interested in the impact of disasters on individuals and communities, as well as the nature of the media beast.

(read short extract from the book)

And now to Cait, who might like to explain why styrofoam cups are so important to the work of Dart...

***