



## BC doctors ante up, sponsor aggressive media stand

Barbara Sibbald

**R**attled by media coverage that they considered negative or inaccurate, physicians in 2 British Columbia communities have responded by hiring their own media consultants.

Dr. Richard Hooper, president of both the Kelowna Medical Society and the society representing BC cardiologists, says doctors in his area see their involvement as a chance to make medicine mean something personal to the public. While the British Columbia Medical Association (BCMA) was duking it out with the elected politicians over funding and other issues, he says, the “real problems” facing smaller communities were being neglected or ignored by local media. The doctors decided to take the news to them.

After putting out their own media releases — “an exhausting business” — the society hired communications consultant Stephen Greenaway. “He helps us spin things into a major story,” says Hooper. For example, they used a BC government study stating that waiting lists for cardiac surgery had doubled in the last 7 years to counteract a Saskatchewan report stating that waiting lists don’t really exist. The story made the lead news on BCTV, where it reached 1.2 million viewers.

Although Hooper is no stranger to the media, he has learned plenty from Greenaway. “The experience has polished all of us. We know when to respond more effectively. And I’m more diplomatic.”

He also learned to edit his “ranting” letters to the editor, making them more succinct and less strident. Greenaway also showed the physicians how to deal with inaccurate reporting; he insisted on tape-recording all interviews. Ninety of the 100 local doctors contributed about \$150 each to hire Greenaway, who now does work for the BCMA too. A group of 9 society members meet with him every second week to develop strategies.

Heightened awareness of the media’s impact led Dr. Gary Randhawa to attempt to improve the image of Kelowna doctors by putting a different spin on the BCMA’s sometimes maligned reduced activity days (RADs). During October’s RAD, he ran a blood clinic in which physicians gave their own blood to help save a “hemorrhaging” health care system. “We thought it was corny, but the media loved it,” says Hooper. About 800 people came, and \$5000 worth of food was collected for the local bank.



**Dr. Gail Plecash was one of about 100 Kelowna and area physicians who donated blood to “save a hemorrhaging health care system”**

Physicians in Victoria have followed Kelowna’s example. In May 1998 they collected \$50 or \$100 from all local doctors and hired a public relations specialist. Mike Geoghegan helped them develop key messages and created a dozen media releases. For example, the group started the furore over MRI waiting lists, which had reached 1 year for nonurgent patients and 4 to 6 weeks for patients needing urgent care. As a result, 2 Victoria physicians met with BC’s minister of health, who subsequently commissioned a special report.

“There has always been a problem with the media bashing physicians,” says Victoria family physician Carole Williams, president of the society representing the province’s FPs. She says this leads to a public perception that doctors are greedy and to blame for all the health care system’s ills.

The Victoria doctors took a page out of Kelowna’s book by using RADs to improve their profile. In February they held a run-for-your-life event to raise money to offset cancer patients’ expenses when they are sent to Vancouver for radiation therapy. Learning to be media savvy has been “fascinating and pleasurable,” says Williams. “We plan to carry on as long as it takes — we’re tenacious.”

*Barbara Sibbald is CMAJ’s Associate Editor, News and Features.*