‘Casual indifference’: why does media ignore indigenous health?

Kerry McCallum and Lisa Waller

The way mainstream media reports indigenous health influences how policies are developed, communicated and implemented, participants at the University of Canberra’s Media and Indigenous Policy symposium heard last week. Research presented at the symposium confirmed what those working in the indigenous health field already know — the dominant feature of mainstream media attention to indigenous health is a lack of interest.

Most of the time, journalists do not report on indigenous health issues at all. But when the media spotlight highlights health issues, reporting is marked by intense spikes of interest and confined to a narrow range of news frames.

![Indigenous health news in three newspapers, 2002-2007](image)
Launching the *Media and Indigenous Policy report*, *Canberra Times* editor-at-large Jack Waterford lamented the era of “casual indifference” to indigenous affairs that characterised the current generation of mainstream journalism.
The project has been exploring the relationships between news media reporting and the development of indigenous health, communication and bilingual education policies over a 20-year period from 1988-2008. Funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery grant, the project team has analysed 4000 news and policy items and conducted interviews with more than 50 public servants, journalists and indigenous policy advocates.

Former NT co-ordinator-general for Remote Indigenous Services, Olga Havnen, told participants how difficult it is for indigenous policy experts to be heard in national debates.

After the shock announcement of the NT intervention in 2007, she co-ordinated 40 indigenous community organisations from across the Territory to produce an alternative “Emergency Intervention” proposal. It was a detailed, measured response to child neglect from those working on the ground in remote communities. A launch was organised and the heads of several organisations flew down to Canberra. Even in an environment of intense media interest about the intervention, Havnen said that not one mainstream journalist or news organisation picked up the story.

The project has investigated why it is so hard for a diversity of voices to be heard in mainstream media debate, and why policymakers, from political leaders to public servants, seem only to listen to those who dominate mainstream media coverage. Lead researcher Kerry McCallum shared her research finding that few indigenous voices, apart from Noel Pearson of Cape York, were heard in mainstream media discussion of indigenous health issues.

Who are the media’s sources on indigenous health?

Lisa Waller’s research found that, in the bilingual education debate, mainstream news media are more likely to seek out spokespersons who represented conservative think tanks, such as Helen Hughes or Pearson, than indigenous policy advocates or academic experts. This view was shared by one of the few academic public intellectuals in the field, Professor Jon
Altman of the Australian National University, who relayed some of the challenges of engaging in mainstream media debates.

Former CEO of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Steve Larkin, relayed a story repeated by indigenous participants interviewed for the study, saying: “I came to understand how fickle the media could be … I found there wasn’t much interest in any sort of positive stories, and I know I’m not the first person to say that.”