

# Unchaining the truth Protecting your reputation during a media crisis

By Malcolm Cole

To a reporter it is a nothing unusual – the sensational news or current affairs story about a supposed scandal in aged care. It might be a rant about a home that has experienced a lapse in accreditation standards, or an “exclusive” interview with a disgruntled resident or relative. Either way, it will quickly be forgotten in the news room. The nature of news means their attention will quickly turn to the next scandal, their next target. The next sensation.

For the aged care facility, however, it will be a recurring nightmare. The allegations that came and went so easily for the journalist will return again and again to the home. Happy residents will be distressed by the attack on their home. Relatives will want to know the real facts. Staff will be questioned by friends and family at barbecues and parties. And management will find themselves explaining the story to prospective clients for years to come.

Sadly, if the tabloid media – and that includes tabloid television – turns its sights on an aged care operator, it makes little difference whether or not they have done the right thing. You do not, however, need to sit by while your reputation – your most precious asset – is trashed by a reporter in search of the daily headline. The secret is a well-prepared crisis communications strategy, good advice and confident execution. You can fight back against unfair media treatment.

Few people in the aged care sector would be unaware of the infamous Today Tonight “lady in chains” story aired last year about an 84-year-old resident of a Sydney home. At the time I was the media adviser to the Minister for Ageing, and my first reaction when I saw the story was to stand by for a media storm. However, it also struck me as odd that an 84-year-old lady would have gone to Bunnings to buy a great length of chain. My first instinct – based on years in the media – was that the television crew had taken the chain as a visual stunt.

My next move was a call to the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency. By sheer coincidence they were performing a support visit at the home. They had visited the resident that morning and instantly confirmed my suspicion. The rest of my calls that morning were to rival media outlets in an effort to expose the fraud.

I phoned the ABC’s Media Watch, the Media section of The Australian, and Today Tonight’s rival program, A Current Affair. All three were eager to expose the fraud. The result of their attention was Today Tonight’s now famous apology to viewers “if you felt misled”.

What could have been a public relations disaster for the entire aged care sector had instead turned into a crisis for the program and the reporter, who was subsequently sacked. The media are rarely as aggressive as when they are confronting a rival who has been caught out fabricating the news.

This is an advantage used very well by a number of Queensland aged care facilities named in The Sunday Mail’s attack on the sector in October 2006. In that case, many local newspapers rushed to the defence of their local facility, publishing supportive articles with positive comments from residents and relatives. The point is that the media can be subjected to the type of harsh spotlight they are quick to shine on others, and they often can be found wanting.

Negative media reports will rarely come as a surprise to an aged care operator. In most cases the issue will be well known. The trigger is most likely to be a negative accreditation report – usually one where residents are deemed to be at risk – or a disgruntled resident or relative who has bombarded staff and management with spurious complaints for months, or even years.

In either case, you can be prepared. You will already have received the complaints and allegations many times, long before you hear them from the journalist. You not only have time to address any genuine problems, but you have time to prepare your public defence. You can gather the evidence that you have reasonably listened to the complaints and show the steps you have taken to address them.

This won’t always deter a reporter who has decided on the story even before asking for your view. But it gives you material to provide to residents, staff, families, shareholders and other media in the event that the story goes ahead. Any damage to your reputation can be minimised with sound advanced planning and strong execution. There is no reason that an aged care provider needs to be chained up by the media.

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