

Viewpoints

Mass media interview

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In the past, ordinary people seldom had a chance to face the media. With global rapid advancement in information exchange, people are now exposed to massive influx of information including those on medical advancement and technology. Today, even ordinary people may inadvertently appear in the media and be interviewed by the media. Professional grades of civil servants, in particular, should also be prepared to do so. Mass media interview takes various forms. These include telephone interview, interview by reporters at your office, interview on the radio and TV. Some of them may be live interviews. I, like most dermatologists, have never had any formal training in handling mass media interview, but I would like to recount some of my personal experience in mass media interviews for readers to share my sweet and sour.

1. You may not escape

The experience that impressed me most is the launch of my article on a local survey of chilblains diagnosed during the cold spells at the end of January 2008. I remembered on one Friday, at around 4:30 pm when I was still busy in the

consultation room, my phone beeped and beeped. It turned out that some reporters approached me for a telephone interview. I did not take the interview for I was at work. Just before I left the office at 5:30 pm, I received a call from the headquarters concerning the mass media enquiry on my publication. The reporters are really fast trackers. So for colleagues who have eye-catching journal articles to publish, be prepared for an interview irrespective of the academic standard of the article.

2. The PPPs for an interview

One must be punctual when attending an interview. Working in New Territories West, I always prefer to attend interview in Broadcast Road than Chun Choi Street, Tseung Kwan O Industrial Estate. It takes me awful lot of time and car mileage for the latter. Furthermore, attending TV interview is more stressful. Wearing a suit for a TV interview is almost a prerequisite unless you are allowed to wear a doctor gown (white coat) which is my preference. For private doctors on solo practice, self-adjustment of work schedule is easy. However, colleagues from civil or public service should be aware that prior approval for the interview is needed. You are the only person to take care of all the interview logistics, but not your administrator. Your work schedule should be adjusted in advance in order to spare time for the interview. Booking for transportation is acceptable if the interview is considered to be an official duty. It should be done as soon as possible or else you will be instructed to "take public transport". Then

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you will have to take public transport but not a taxi, unless you will pay the taxi fare from your own pocket.

3. Know yourself, know your counterpart

Before you accept an invitation for an interview, it is better for you to understand the nature and background of the interview. If you are not sure, clarify with the interviewer and seek opinion from your colleague or supervisor. In most cases, the objective is straightforward. A few tabloid magazines or newspapers could be tricky and occasionally, there could be a hidden agenda. You may wonder why on earth we medical professionals need to be concerned about that. When I was the chairman of The Hong Kong Society of Dermatology & Venereology, I was once interviewed by a newspaper on venereal warts. The interviewer put quite a lot of focus on non-venereal transmission though I had emphasized on sexual acquisition of the disease. Later, I found out that my interview script was out in the "Man's Circle" where I was only given small coverage in one corner but much of the page was devoted to a lady doctor including her big (not so pretty) photo. This doctor, probably a practitioner in the Mainland, stressed on the importance of non-sexual transmission of genital wart! Another incident was on terbinafine in the treatment of onychomycosis. That interview was conducted by the then "best-selling" weekly magazine. The interview covered fungal infections and the use of terbinafine in onychomycosis. I later realised my opinion was used to attack the boss of a health maintenance organization whose frontline doctors could only use the older generation antifungal agents for onychomycosis.

4. Interrogation is not interrogation

This is a wrong concept that if you accept an interview, then you are the person to be

interrogated. For all interviews especially the live ones, always get prepared and understand the questions well before shooting. My belief is that if you do not feel comfortable with a question, it is better to inquire and clarify beforehand. Caution should be exercised for civil servant interviewees in expressing their views publicly especially on policy and administrative issues. For example, opinion on the legislation of restricted use of laser machines by medical and health personnel may be sensitive. Academic questions might be challenging to you too unless you have sufficient preparation. If you do not have sufficient knowledge or information on hand, you should not feel ashamed to reply "I do not have the data on hand", or "I am not sure, will check". Once in a general health talk, the interviewer suddenly asked me on the efficacy of using zoster immunoglobulin in herpes zoster. I was not prepared for that. On another occasion, I wasn't sure if *Sarcoptes scabiei* should be classified in the class of Insecta (it should be in the class of Arachnida)! Before the interview, one should also check phenomena in local and regional contexts. For example, I was asked why local people described chilblains lesions as "蘿蔔". Question that appears too simple may escape a specialist's attention.

5. Western medicine, Chinese community

Hong Kong is an international city. However, more than 90% of the population is Chinese. The teaching of medicine, however, is delivered in English medium. Local doctors seldom have the chance to have a live interview in English channels. But speaking in Cantonese channels may not be as easy as one would have thought for the simple threat of stage fright, and that many technical terms are expected to be given in Chinese. I was once embarrassed for not being able to recall simple Chinese translations like "mite" as "蟎", "activated" as "活性". Further, in the context of a research project, I had wrongly

interpreted "involved" as "牽涉" instead of a more proper translation of "參與". Therefore, interviewees should prepare in advance to get most of the Chinese translations ready. In addition, if you are to be interviewed by TV or radio, do take time to practice correct Chinese pronunciation. It is interesting to find that the programme host may make fun out of the Chinese terms. For example, the Chinese for "histamine" is "組胺", the programme host tells the audience "good morning" in an effort to arouse their interest!

6. Freelancer supply

Sometimes a media would require you to submit a Chinese script. If you are not given any freelance

translation support or have problem in preparing a Chinese text, you should make it clear that you could only provide an English script and you are not responsible for doing the Chinese translation. For colleagues who are not familiar with Chinese translation, the work could be very time consuming.

Colleagues in the public sector may be reluctant to attend mass media interviews. If this is unavoidable, please get yourself prepared well ahead of time including checking your old suit in the wardrobe. To share with you my last piece of experience on TV interview, when the lady in the make-up room held her brush up over my face, I said, "Sorry, I am allergic to cosmetics!" Good luck to you all.