

# Excellence in two worlds of medicine and journalism

Dr Ray Moynihan has a record of excellence as an investigative journalist and now as a health and medicine academic researcher ...

**R**AY Moynihan's very first piece of research was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Putting that in perspective, it's like picking up a javelin for the first time and throwing a world record distance, or tonking Jimmy Anderson over the boundary on debut.

But Ray Moynihan — now Dr Ray Moynihan, following the awarding of his PhD in 2015 — has a history of excellence dating back to his days as an award-winning journalist.

He spent 5 years as researcher and producer on the ABC's *Four Corners*, followed by a stint as national health and science reporter with the *7.30 Report*. In 1995 he was the co-recipient, along with Dr Norman Swan, of the Peter Grieve Award for Medical Journalism. In 1996 he won the Michael Daley Award for excellence in science journalism.

It was his time at the *7.30 Report* which opened his eyes to the world of health and medicine, including what could be described as a somewhat dodgy underbelly.

"It was life-changing in some ways," Dr Moynihan tells the *MJA*. "I became more and more interested in reporting on health, medicine and the business of medicine — and to be very clear, it was often the dirty business of medicine as well. Alongside the fabulous things, there was lots of stuff driven by professional and commercial interests that can cause harm.

"I very quickly realised that there was a very big story emerging in medicine, that had two legs. One was the rise of the evidence-informed approach.

"The other was the growing concern that we were doing too much of a good thing.

"Those were related but they became two strands in my reporting and I became more interested and did more investigative work in that field."

Dr Moynihan says he was always very driven as a journalist, with a huge amount of passion which he always tried to match with rigour.

"I was obsessive about avoiding inaccuracy and avoiding hype and exaggeration because they were the things that I was largely criticising in my work.

"My concern and outrage about [hype and exaggeration in medical journalism] led me to do a study — quite an important study, ultimately, that we published in the *NEJM*."

That study was called *Coverage by the news media of the benefits and risks of medications*<sup>1</sup> and was the result of a year spent working at Harvard University on a Harkness Fellowship in 1999.

"We found a systemic bias, [that was] exaggerating benefits, playing down harms, [and included] a silence on conflicts of interest," says Dr Moynihan.

Apart from the importance of the study itself, publication in the *NEJM* also marked the beginning of his move from journalist to fulltime academic researcher.

"Spending a year in Harvard in 1999 gave me a taste for the academy, gave me a taste for research, introduced me to a whole other level of rigorous scientific investigation," he says.

Today Dr Moynihan works at Bond University as an early-career researcher with an NHMRC fellowship. Since that *NEJM* debut he has developed an impressive body of academic work and writing resulting in articles in the *Lancet*, the *Medical Journal of Australia*,<sup>2</sup> *PLoS Medicine*, *PLoS ONE*, *BMJ OPEN* and the *BMJ*.

Has it been an advantage coming to academia via another life as a journalist?

"Yes, definitely," he says. "I certainly feel a great advantage within the academy having come from outside, having a fresh perspective, a former life as a journalist, an alternative life.

"It gives you a confidence in the world and helps you put academic work into a broader perspective. Particularly coming from journalism, you come with quite good abilities to write, which is crucial in the academy."

Which leads us to Dr Moynihan's great passion — the accurate and insightful communication of science and medicine.

"I'm working with extremely insightful, intelligent, successful, influential academics with global reputations, and I am often surprised by their lack of confidence to engage more fully with the world. With a little more confidence, they could engage more fully with the world via the media and many other mechanisms. That's important because it's a way that public investment in research pays dividends.

"If you can't communicate the ideas about what you're doing in a simple, clear way, then have another try, because it's vital that we can keep a connection with the world through being able to easily and simply articulate what we're doing.

"So many researchers and academics struggle with that.

"I'm not saying we should dumb things down. I'm not saying we should compromise sophistication or complexity, but I am saying I'm often suspicious if someone can't really explain what they're doing and why they're doing it in terms that I and everyone can understand."

Dr Moynihan has a simple message for medical students.

"It is absolutely and utterly important to see your work as a medical or science student as part of a much broader context," he says. "For a start it's only one part of your life.

"We get far too hung up on our careers, on our work life, often at the expense of our personal lives. When I look back on my life, yes the career is important, but the life is much more important — the relationships with loved ones, with friends, with colleagues.

"While it seems all consuming when you're studying, that career trajectory is just one part of a much broader, richer life that involves dancing and music and sport and travel and love and despair and suffering and all of that stuff.

"Think about doing other things as well as the medical careers. Take time off to do other things."

Dr Moynihan can recommend combining health and medical life with journalism.

"I'm aware of a number of doctors who have spent time both as journalists and clinicians. That is an invaluable combination — it's a very potent cocktail."

## References

1. <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJM200006013422206>
2. <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2018/209/8/australia-responding-complex-challenge-overdiagnosis>

Cate Swannell

doi:10.5694/mja18.0511C1



Dr Ray Moynihan

*"If you can't communicate the ideas about what you're doing in a simple, clear way, then have another try, because it's vital that we can keep a connection with the world"*