

---

## Kylie Minogue – Lifesaver

Shock Australian rock group TISM caused a stir with the lines “All my prayers have now been answered/Delta Goodrem has got cancer”. However, lives may in fact be saved when celebrities get sick.

The diagnosis of Kylie Minogue’s breast cancer led to an unprecedented increase in the number of women seeking mammograms, according to a report in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

Simon Chapman, Professor of Public Health at the University of Sydney, commenced a study on the depiction of health matters in the media on 3 May this year, giving him exactly 2 weeks of data before Minogue’s announcement sent coverage of breast cancer up 20-fold.

Getting a public health message to the general community requires more than just airtime, but many of the media’s themes were a health promoter’s dream. Chapman and his co-authors wrote: “The notion that breast cancer was no respecter of celebrity status, wealth or youth (it was something that ‘could happen to anyone’) were often emphasised,” along with Minogue’s age.

Perhaps most significantly, “Kylie

was repeatedly said to have a good prognosis because she detected the cancer early, and this boded well for her recovery and survival”.

Data from four states showed an increase of 40% in breast screening bookings during the 2-week publicity blitz compared with the period before Minogue’s cancer hit the headlines. Perhaps more significantly there was a doubling of the number of women seeking screening for the first time. The one state that provided age-related data showed that the increase was greatest among younger women.

After the publicity died down screenings were 6% higher than before the news, but this involved a 39% increase in initial screenings, with rescreenings up just 0.1%. Chapman notes that it would take a very expensive publicity campaign to achieve similar results.

Roughly 0.7% of women have invasive cancer detected at their first screening, so it seems that in Australia alone Kylie’s illness may have alerted almost 100 women to their illness, many in time to greatly improve their chances of recovery.

Chapman’s research has created its own burst of publicity, making news in

Russia and the Philippines as well as plenty of coverage at home. The attention supports Chapman’s contention that “my colleagues are preoccupied with our own interventions, dismissing events such as this as background, when in fact their effect is hugely bigger than anything we achieve”.

Celebrity illnesses cannot be engineered, but drama is different. The paper points to anecdotal reports that the inclusion of diseases on drama series or current affairs shows can greatly increase screening procedures, but Chapman says there has been no research to find out if this is always effective or depends on the character portrayed. He speculates there might be resistance from scriptwriters to the idea of being paid to include particular topics in their stories, but adds that TV programs are “always desperate for ideas”.

Chapman’s paper concludes: “Celebrity illnesses and related health events are inevitable, as is the massive news coverage these can bring. Health agencies would be wise to develop news management strategies, whereby celebrity management agencies could be rapidly assisted with responses to the inevitable “frequently asked questions” that news analysis can catalogue.”

## Eureka for Huntington’s Research

The British Council Eureka Prize for Inspiring Science has been awarded to Dr Anthony Hannan for his research into Huntington’s disease. Hannan’s work has been covered twice in *Australasian Science* (June 2004, pp.31–33, June 2005, p.8). It offers hope not only of better treatments for the fatal disease, but also of offering insights into more common brain diseases such as Alzheimer’s.

Hannan has explored different aspects of Huntington’s disease using mice carrying the same gene. The cita-

tion for the prize, organised by the Australian Museum, focused on Hannan’s discovery that the onset of Huntington’s disease can be delayed in mice through exposure to a stimulating environment, encouraging the greater use of occupational therapy for human sufferers of the disease. The citation noted that Huntington’s was “previously considered the epitome of genetic determinism”, and Hannan’s work has consequently challenged ideas about the relationship between nature and nurture on a wider scale.

## NOBEL LAUREATE JOINS AUSTRALASIAN SCIENCE

Laureate Professor Peter Doherty, Australia’s most recognisable scientist since sharing the 1996 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine with Prof Rolf Zinkernagel, has joined *Australasian Science* as Patron.

Doherty became a subscriber to Australia’s longest-running science monthly while working in the US prior to his return to Australia in 2002 to take up a University of Melbourne post reserved for Nobel Laureates.

Doherty and Zinkernagel’s groundbreaking research at the John Curtin School of Medical Research in the Australian National University triggered a revolution in understanding how the body fights or succumbs to infection (see pp.40–42, 44–45).