

MEDICINE AND THE MEDIA

Picture imperfect

What happened when a sharp eyed orthopaedic specialist used his medical knowledge to uncover the true story behind a photo on the front page of *The Sunday Times*?

I am not your average newspaper addict, but once in a while, depending on the day of the week and the flavour of the month, I do pick up a broadsheet newspaper from my local grocer's or from the coffee shop. On Sunday 29 June, with the unattractive prospect of being stuck in the hospital for another 24 hours, I decided to indulge myself in a cup of coffee from the cafe next door along with a copy of *The Sunday Times*. A cursory glance at the front page showed that Mugabe's regime was wreaking yet more havoc in Zimbabwe. Accompanying the story was a picture of a child in plaster casts. I was keen to get to the sports pages and the Wimbledon news, but suddenly it struck me that there was something odd about the photograph. A closer look made me realise that the photograph was out of sync with the rest of the report.

The 11 month old boy had plaster casts on both legs below the knee, allegedly after trauma inflicted by Mugabe's tyrants. That couldn't be true. Firstly, the legs and feet were deformed and turned in. Even in Zimbabwe plaster casts after trauma would be applied so that the legs and feet looked as anatomically correct as possible. No one would put plasters on with the feet still deformed, unless of course the deformity had not been secondary to trauma. Secondly, the plaster casts on both feet looked identical, with the same deformities. If the report were to be believed then it had to be an identical set of injuries—extremely unlikely. Thirdly, the mechanism was all wrong. A child doesn't get his or her legs and feet crushed by being hurled to the floor. The plaster casts seemed to be corrective casts for clubfeet, the commonest type of limb deformity present at birth. My diagnosis was congenital talipes equinovarus.

Promptly I emailed the editorial desk and

the foreign affairs section at *The Sunday Times*, expressing my concerns. About 36 hours later I got a reply from the pictures editor saying that they were waiting for the photographer's arrival at a safe place so that they could ascertain the circumstances the photograph had been taken in. I clarified the matter with the reporters on the story, who must have had access to the child and mother in question? It seemed to be a first hand report. Apparently the reporters responsible were freelance, not employed by *The Sunday Times*, and there could have been errors in translation.

A few more emails went to and fro. I was getting frustrated by the delay in clarifying matters. Then a further piece was published on 6 July, which at first glance looked like an unreserved apology (www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/africa/article4276338.ece). Closer scrutiny showed that this was not so. This piece said that concerns were first raised when one of the reporters took the child for treatment at the local hospital in Harare. So apparently the false nature of the claim was detected only when the newspaper pursued the story on altruistic, humanitarian grounds, not when the error was pointed out to them. This was a bit strange, given that my first email questioning the veracity of the report and photograph had been sent by 2 30 pm on 29 July, with two follow-up emails the same evening—all in all three emails within 24 hours of the paper hitting the stands. This seemed like an attempt by



the newspaper to make an error while claiming the moral high ground. Also, I realised that the same story and the photograph had been published first in *The New York Times* and then later in *Newsweek*. The *Newsweek* article on 3 July showed the child without the casts, giving clear evidence of bilateral clubfeet (www.newsweek.com/id/144521). And yet the accompanying article discussed the severity of the inflicted trauma, which caused the child's feet and legs to be turned in. The small matter of the photograph showing uncasted, deformed feet had obviously escaped the editors' notice. On 9 July *The New York Times* issued an editor's note confirming the false nature of the report and the photograph (www.nytimes.com/2008/06/26/world/africa/26zimbabwe.html).

Was it my email that led to the newspapers coming out with the truth? I honestly don't know. An attempt to clarify the precise sequence of events with *The Sunday Times* was met with stony silence. I do wonder, however, what happened to the boy whose clubfeet needed orthopaedic treatment. Did the newspapers follow up their interest in his wellbeing after it was discovered that his deformities were not inflicted by Mugabe's regime?

Manoj Padman, national paediatric orthopaedic fellow, Sheffield Children' Hospital mnpjd@aol.com

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2008;337:a1659