

Clare Cooper reports on how CMF is equipping Christian doctors for the vital task of handling the media

A word in season



Photo: PA

IT'S VITAL THAT THE VOICES OF CHRISTIANS IN THE MEDICAL PROFESSION ARE HEARD IN PUBLIC DEBATE.

With healthcare issues in the news almost every day, it's vital that the voices of Christians in the medical profession are heard in public debate. Some Christians have a natural aptitude for working with the media. For most of us, however, some basic training can make a huge difference to our effectiveness. And there is scope for even the best 'naturals' to sharpen their skills.

CMF offers media training to encourage and equip doctors to get across the message of Christian medical ethics, on radio as well as television. This training enables them to speak confidently from their professional experience and Christian understanding. Since the project began in 1998, over 120 doctors have participated in media training days and a small number have had advanced training over two days. Courses are held in various parts of the country each year. Recent venues have included Aberdeen, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Dundee and London.

Basic media training

The basic media training day is led by Andrew Fergusson (former CMF General Secretary) along with John Forrest and Andrew Graystone (TV and radio producers). Teaching is informal and relaxed. The tuition style is intended to be encouraging and is suitable for those who are unsure of their abilities in front of the camera as well as for those who want to test out their ability to do more. Participants are able to practise interview techniques by means of simulated radio and television interviews. Useful tips for radio include sitting still in your chair (it might be squeaky) and smiling at the microphone as the effect comes across to your audience. Hints for appearing on television include talking to the interviewer rather than the camera and avoiding glancing to the side, as this appears shifty.

Group members learn how to deal with a request for an interview, which may be at very short notice with little time to prepare. They learn how to appear interesting and authoritative without putting others down. Stories come over well but statistics should be used in moderation. The interviewee needs to know the message he wants to get across; he can push his agenda and repeat the message if necessary. The interviewer may be nervous, inexperienced or poorly informed but these won't

be problems if the doctor has the interview under control. It's important to be yourself. Some questions may be difficult or irrelevant but there are ways of handling these.

Future opportunities

The media training days have been greatly appreciated by attendees and some have subsequently given radio or TV interviews on medical ethics topics. Over 20 trained people have offered to be available for contact by journalists. CMF is developing a confidential database of doctors who are keen to get the Christian message across on medical and ethical issues, by radio or TV, on a regular basis (probably no more than three or four times a year).

The database indicates the topics on which each doctor is prepared to speak and where they work. Allen Moxham, CMF's press officer, provides the link with the media and refers radio, television or newspaper inquiries to CMF contacts as opportunities arise. Some participants have not intended using their media training skills but have then found themselves in the media spotlight and were glad of their training.

Advanced training

Three advanced training courses have been run so far with an exciting programme including a day at Bushey studios. Interviews are more demanding and more time is spent on improving television skills. Participation is by invitation and each course focuses on a particular topic. The courses have covered teenage sexuality, end of life issues and beginning of life issues. Doctors with an interest in these fields were invited and these courses have proved very popular. Further advanced courses are planned. The next will focus on international health.

One GP participant commented after her first television appearance: 'The thing that really struck me was being part of the body of Christ. It felt as if I was there for all to see and yet the whole time I was being supported in an amazing way by the rest of the body praying for me and supporting me from the background.'

Quite amazing - and without the CMF training - I don't think I would have been asked, let alone have felt like saying yes.'

Clare Cooper is CMF Medical Secretary

Are you interested?

The next Basic Media Training course will be 22 October in Manchester.

Contact: judy.wilson@cmf.org.uk for more information.

Cost is £50 for doctors and £25 for students.

The course is eligible for PDP.