

Quality Assurance Project 10:

Accuracy (Radio News II)

Final Report June 2009

Advise. Verify. Review



Editorial Policies

The Editorial Policies of the ABC are its leading standards and a day-to-day reference for makers of ABC content. The Editorial Policies -

- give practical shape to statutory obligations in the ABC Act;
- set out the ABC's self-regulatory standards and how to enforce them; and
- describe and explain to staff and the community the editorial and ethical principles fundamental to the ABC.

The role of Director Editorial Policies was established in 2007 and comprises three main functions: to advise, verify and review.

The verification function principally involves the design and implementation of quality assurance projects to allow the ABC to assess whether it is meeting the standards required of it and to contribute to continuous improvement of the national public broadcaster and its content.

Acknowledgements

The work of the following people is acknowledged: Denis Muller, whose careful leadership of three accuracy projects (QAs 2, 6 and 10) has developed the methodology at every stage; Jennifer Sterland, Editorial Policies information co-ordinator, who undertook the exacting task of locating, extracting, distributing and keeping track of the sample data; and the panel of independent reviewers who sought out the documentary and other sources in order to check the accuracy of the sample items. Throughout these accuracy projects, the combined as well as the individual skills and experience of the reviewers has added to the quality of the work. Thanks also to Kate Torney, Director News, Steven Alward, Head of Policy and Staff Development of the News Division, and all the News Division staff whose co-operation facilitated the project.

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Foreword

The ABC TV program *Media Watch*, in fulfilling its task of reviewing the performance of the Australian media, will often contact the sources quoted by a particular newspaper or radio or TV outlet to check directly with the source the veracity of the material attributed to the source in public by the news outlet which is under scrutiny from *Media Watch*.

This must be discomforting for the journalists whose work is involved, whether they work for the ABC or not. Journalists generally nurture relationships with their sources carefully, and guard the good ones jealously. Sources supply the lifeblood of the journalist's work, information. The idea that someone else is independently making contact with a journalist's source to discuss with them the accuracy of how the journalist reported information relating to that source is naturally unsettling to the journalist. It may even feel threatening, because the journalist's relationship with the source turns on trust and credibility.

Journalists would generally prefer that if one of their sources has a problem with what the journalist has written, the source contacts them direct. But what if the source has no problem with an item, or in any event has not alerted the journalist directly to any issue arising from his or her reporting? And then what if a reviewer, who is part of a quality assurance project assessing a randomly chosen sample of news items, makes contact with a journalist's source to ask if an item that relates to the source is accurate? A smaller version of the same unsettling 'Media Watch call' phenomenon may occur.

And so it has proved in this project, the third into the accuracy of content produced for radio by the ABC News Division. In this project, reviewers made direct contact with sources. The experience was mixed. More on this later.

First, the result: 100 news items were assessed, and the accuracy rate was 92 percent for plain-facts accuracy and 97 percent for contextual accuracy. This high to very high accuracy is broadly consistent with the results of QA2¹ and QA6². Evidence is growing that the ABC, at least in relation to radio news and current affairs, meets its statutory obligation to provide news and information that is accurate: *ABC Act*, section 8 (1) (c). Improvement is always possible. The Director News has indicated that areas that may require attention will be examined.

Back to the issue of directly approaching sources during these quality assurance projects. During this project, at least one source who was contacted by a reviewer to check the accuracy of an item appears to have mentioned the fact to an ABC journalist with whom that source was familiar. The incident led to a thoughtful exchange, which News Division included in its response to the draft report (see Appendix I, page 27), and to which the project manager has responded (see Appendix 1, pages 27-28).

Direct contact with sources has other consequences. Some sources are mystified that a person working for a media organisation would be part of a project systematically to assess the accuracy of that same organisation's output. For some, it is so unusual they seem to begin by smelling for a rat. These reactions tell us something about the culture of Australian media and media relations. Here is an excerpt from a briefing prepared by the project manager —

A [government media adviser] had great difficulty getting her head around what the reviewer was doing. When asked the standard questions about the accuracy of an item, she hesitated after each one. Asked why, she replied that, as she did not know the context of the complaint against the journalist, she was reluctant to take part. The reviewer reported: 'When it was explained that there had been no complaint and that this was simply a random checking exercise, she breathed an audible sigh of relief and happily told me it was all correct.'

A different consequence of making direct contact with sources in an accuracy QA project was the unsolicited praise that the ABC received. The staff who go through the discomforting parts of self-regulation deserve to enjoy the satisfying parts, like these –

¹ Accuracy, April 2008, available at http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/qa2_final_report-april_2008.pdf

² Accuracy (Radio News), March 2009, available at http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/qa6-final_report-march_2009.pdf

- One [source contacted by a reviewer] said he was 'very happy' with the work of the ABC in his
 jurisdiction. The other said: 'I am very happy with the ABC. In 17 years I have never had anything
 go out that was not accurate.'
- Another respondent, a press secretary, speaking of the ABC's item under review, confirmed that it was wholly accurate, 'although they took all of our spin out of it and just had the facts.'
- [Source] said that he had spoken to the press officer at his local MP's office. 'He put out a press release and it was picked up by [a Sunday newspaper].' The ABC had then called him directly. He said the ABC report was 'more accurate than the press release'. 'There were a couple of slight errors in it but when I spoke to the radio journalist he put them right.'

It would seem that any systematic quality assurance effort by a media organisation is going to unsettle journalists to some degree, puzzle sources to some degree, and yield some unforeseen results – at least until quality assurance projects, as an aspect of media self-regulation that is quite distinct from complaints-handling, become more routine and better known.

The further discussions which the Director News has welcomed are part of the continuous improvement that the projects are intended to engender. Improvements in the methodologies for these projects have consistently resulted from constructive engagement.

PAUL CHADWICK
Director Editorial Policies

Note by Director News

The News Division notes that this review has found a high to very high level of accuracy in weekend and regional ABC radio news items. The Division will look closely at the slightly lower levels of accuracy in these bulletins compared with bulletins produced by metropolitan newsrooms on weekdays. News would also welcome further discussion about the part of the methodology for this project that involved the reviewers speaking directly with sources to clarify issues of accuracy.

KATE TORNEY Director News

Quality Assurance Project 10

Accuracy (Radio News II) - Final Report

June 2009

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I. Introduction

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation commissioned this firm in 2007 to assist it devise and implement a system of editorial quality assurance. The system consists of a number of separate projects, of which this is the tenth. Its focus is on the accuracy of weekend and regional Radio News bulletins, and follows on from Project 6, which examined the accuracy of all bulletins produced by News Division.

The findings from Project 6 indicated that weekend and regional bulletins contained a disproportionately high rate of inaccuracies, when compared with the whole sample of bulletins. However, the sub-samples of weekend and regional bulletins were small, and it was decided that a larger study should be done to see if the indications from Project 6 were borne out.

The methodology for both studies was devised by the Principal of this firm, Dr Denis Muller, in collaboration with the ABC's Director Editorial Policies, Mr Paul Chadwick. While the two methodologies were identical in most respects, there was one major difference. In this latter project, the reviewers of the items were invited to contact the sources named in the items and ask them about issues concerning accuracy, if they were otherwise unable to make a determination.

This had the effect of reducing the attrition rate in earlier studies caused by the absence of documentation, as well as enriching the assessment process.

Of course, contacting sources creates the risk that they will either be prompted to find inaccuracies that had not previously occurred to them, or to have a different recollection of the facts or possibly to seek to resile from something said. These matters are discussed in some detail in the Methodology section of this report.

In short, however, there were no such incidents. In fact, respondents quite often took the opportunity to praise the quality of work by ABC journalists, and to express approval that the organisation itself had undertaken this review.

The study was implemented independently of the ABC by Dr Muller, reporting to Mr Chadwick.

This report:

- · contains an executive summary;
- presents conclusions;
- presents the rationale, objectives and guiding principles for the project;
- describes the methodology, and
- · presents findings and determinations.

In accordance with procedural fairness, a draft of this report was circulated to News Division for comment. Those comments have been taken into account in arriving at determinative findings and conclusions. The full response from News Division is included as Appendix I.

We thank the ABC for inviting us to participate in this very interesting and important work. We regard it as a privilege to be asked to assist the national broadcaster in strengthening its capacities in such a vital area. We are accountable to the ABC through Mr Chadwick for the proper conduct of this project. We would be happy to discuss this report through him and by arrangement with him at any mutually convenient time.

DR DENIS MULLER Principal

June 2009

II. Executive summary

A. Scope and method

The scope of this quality assurance project was confined to plain-fact and contextual accuracy of items broadcast in ABC Radio weekend and regional news bulletins. It did not cover balance, fairness or impartiality, which have been treated separately in the ABC's Editorial Quality Assurance (EQA) program. The bulletins covered by this study were all produced by News Division. It is acknowledged that News Division produces content for multiple ABC platforms; this study was confined to radio.

The plain-fact and contextual accuracy of each item reviewed was assessed against the following scale developed for EQA Projects 2 and 6, and subsequently adopted by News Division for its own purposes:

Wholly accurate

Substantially accurate

Immaterially inaccurate

Materially inaccurate

Each item was individually reviewed by two experienced journalists from outside the ABC. Their reviews were conducted independently of each other, and then compared by the Project Manager. Where the assessments were discrepant, he assessed the evidence presented by the reviewers and, where necessary, reviewed the item himself to arrive at a finding.

The reviews consisted of reading the transcripts from the broadcast and, where audio was available, listening to the items as broadcast and comparing their content with documentary source material referred to in the item or on which it was evident the item was based. Where necessary, the reviewers contacted the sources named in the item to check on accuracy.

The items assessed were sampled from items on domestic Australian news prepared wholly within Australia, based mainly on identifiable documentary source material, and broadcast in February and March 2009. More detail on the sampling is given in the Methodology section of this report.

One hundred items were included, 35 from Regional, 33 from Metro Weekend and 32 from SERN National bulletins.

B. Findings

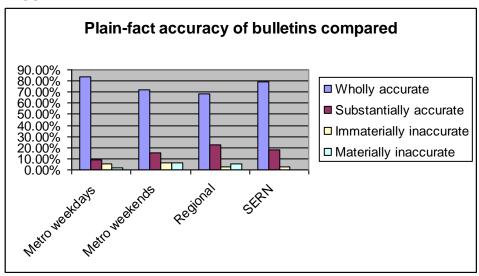
There is a high to very high level of accuracy overall in weekend and regional ABC Radio news items, but there are four qualifications to make about this blanket statement:

- 1. The standard of plain-fact accuracy in these bulletins overall is not as high as in bulletins produced in metropolitan newsrooms on weekdays.
- 2. There is a noticeable fall-off in the standard of plain-fact accuracy in Metropolitan Weekend and Regional bulletins, compared with Metropolitan Weekday and SERN/national bulletins.
- 3. There is also a fall-off in the standard of plain-fact accuracy in SERN/national bulletins against Metro Weekday quality, but it is slight.

4. It is in Regional bulletins that the fall-off is most pronounced.

The differences are illustrated in Figure 2.1. The data for Metropolitan Weekday bulletins were taken from EQA Project 6 for the purpose of the comparisons.

FIGURE 2.1



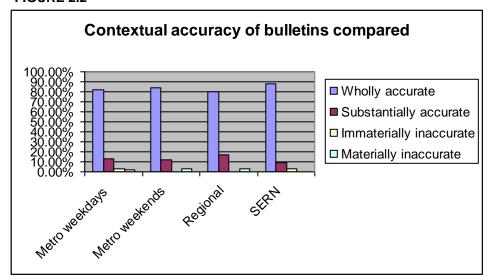
Of particular note is the fact that Regional bulletins contain the lowest level of wholly accurate items, and the highest level of substantially accurate items. This confirms the hypothesis in the report on EQA Project 6, which stated:

What is particularly noticeable about the regional figures is the relatively high incidence of items that are "substantially accurate" as to plain fact . . . when compared with metropolitan data. This suggests that in regional areas, journalists get it nearly right, but not quite right, somewhat more often than their metropolitan counterparts.

1. Contextual accuracy

Figure 2.2 compares the various categories of bulletin for contextual accuracy. The standard of contextual accuracy is higher than that of plain-fact accuracy in Metro Weekend, Regional and SERN/national bulletins, and nearly as good as, or slightly better than, the standards of contextual accuracy in Metro Weekday bulletins. Once more, the standard in Regional bulletins is lower than in the other three but the difference is slight, so support for the hypothesis from EQA 6 is weak here.

FIGURE 2.2



The overall standards of accuracy shown by this study are presented in headline form in Table 2.1. It shows the overall proportion of items found to be wholly or substantially accurate for plain facts was 92% and for context 97%. The overall proportion found to be immaterially or materially inaccurate was 8% for plain facts and 3% for context. The incidence of material inaccuracy was very low: 4% for plain facts and 2% for context.

TABLE 2.1: RATES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR TOTAL SAMPLE (n = 100)

Total a	ccurate	Total ir	naccurate
Plain facts	Context	Plain facts	Context
%	%	%	%
92.0	97.0	8.0	3.0

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

Of the eight items found to be inaccurate (either immaterially or materially), three were found to be inaccurate for both plain fact and context.

This study revealed a tendency by some reporters to mishandle figures. No fewer than five items among the eight found to be immaterially or materially inaccurate involved the mishandling of numeric data.

III. Conclusions

- 1. ABC Radio News produced by News Division for broadcast at weekends and in regional bulletins attains a high to very high level of factual and contextual accuracy.
- 2. There is a noticeable difference between levels of plain-fact accuracy between the bulletin categories, with regional bulletins containing a smaller proportion of wholly accurate items and a larger proportion of substantially accurate items than either Metro Weekend or SERN/national bulletins.
- 3. A similar pattern is evident with contextual accuracy, but the differences are slight.
- 4. The mistakes found were neither deliberate nor egregious.
- 5. The additional step, used for the first time in this study, of allowing the reviewers to speak to sources in order to clarify issues of accuracy that could not be resolved by documents alone, worked well. However, a regional journalist has raised a concern about this, on the apparent basis that it may undermine the relationship between journalists and sources. The Project Manager has offered to explore this further. Mostly the feedback from sources to the reviewers was positive: they congratulated the ABC for doing this kind of checking.
- The existing arrangements under which reviewers do not make contact with ABC journalists should be maintained.
- 7. As with previous reviews of accuracy, News Division provided a timely and constructive response, as a result of which:
 - One item was re-assessed from Materially Inaccurate to Wholly Accurate
 - One item was re-assessed from Immaterially Inaccurate to Wholly Accurate
 - Two items were re-assessed from Immaterially Inaccurate to Substantially Accurate
- 8. The response in relation to one finding revealed the kind of difficulties that can arise when weekend staff go off duty for several days and issues that may have been picked up in the immediate aftermath of a story are lost track of. In this case, the impetus for the item had come from a secondary source (a newspaper report) which later turned out to be inaccurate.
- 9. The double-blind system of assessment again yielded high correlations of congruence between the pairs of reviewers.

IV. Rationale, objectives and guiding principles

A. Rationale

The ABC aspires to the highest standards in all its work, and the standard of its news and current affairs work is of particular importance because of the large role played by the national broadcaster in the practical functioning of Australian democracy.

Of central importance to the health of any democracy is trust in those who wield public power. These include journalists and media outlets. That trust cannot exist without professional and institutional accountability. Although the ABC already has well-developed internal mechanisms of journalistic accountability, it is increasing its commitment.

The role of the ABC Director Editorial Policies includes the development of fair and rigorous methodologies to verify that content is meeting the standards required by the *ABC Act* and the ABC's Editorial Policies, and to contribute to continuous improvement.

B. Objectives

The objective of the project is to reliably measure, and report on, the performance, in respect of accuracy, of ABC Radio news, and to further refine the methodology for conducting this type of quality assurance project.

C. Guiding principles

All projects conducted under the Editorial Quality Assurance (EQA) program are guided by six principles.

1. Principle 1 – Respect for editorial independence

Section 27 of the *ABC Act* requires the ABC to develop and maintain an independent news service. The word "independent" is crucial both as a general principle and as a principle of particular application to this project.

Section 2 of the ABC's Editorial Policies gives independence the status of a key value in the ABC, applicable generally across the organisation.

Independence in the context of this project refers particularly to editorial independence. This is a contested term, having been interpreted by some outside the media as meaning journalistic licentiousness, and by others as an essential element of ensuring reasonable diversity of media content in a country in which the ownership and control of the commercial media is highly concentrated. Of greater relevance to the ABC is the concept of independence for the national public broadcaster from the government of the day.

From the ABC's Editorial Policies it is unambiguously clear that when related to the ABC's news service, the term means journalists must be able to make decisions on editorial content free from improper or undesirable influences:

Para 5.1.7 of the Policies states that news programs should depend fully on public funding. This means they are independent of commercial interests and pressures.

Para 5.1.6 refers, if somewhat obliquely, to the requirement that decisions on content be based on the professional expertise and judgment of staff and not on personal opinion.

Para 5.2.2 (d) states that editorial judgments will be based on news values, not on political, commercial or sectional interests or personal views.

From these the consultants have distilled what they conceive to be the essence of editorial independence as it relates to the ABC's news and current affairs programs:

News and current affairs content will be decided by the ABC's professional journalists applying established news values and public-interest considerations, unconstrained by political, commercial, sectional or personal interests, and conforming to the Editorial Policies of the ABC.

This definition is broadly consistent with other definitions of editorial independence, for example *The Age* Charter of Editorial Independence.

The first guiding principle of this quality assurance project is that those conducting it recognise and respect the editorial independence of ABC journalists.

Everything done in this process is directed at strengthening that independence, not weakening it. For that reason it is considered of paramount importance that those carrying it out be accountable to the ABC's Director Editorial Policies and, through him, to the Managing Director, who is also Editor-in-Chief.

2. Principle 2 – Professional accountability

Journalists, including ABC journalists, should be accountable for the way they exercise their powers and meet the responsibilities that come with them. At the same time, mechanisms of accountability must not inhibit the proper exercising of editorial independence.

3. Principle 3 – Natural justice

The quality-assurance process must adhere to the requirements of natural justice. No adverse findings will be conclusively made until the program team concerned have had a full and proper opportunity to respond to any draft finding. That response will then be taken into account in arriving at conclusive findings.

4. Principle 4 – An educative focus

This is an educative and developmental accountability process, not a censorious or punitive one. Individual journalists' identities will not be used in association with the results.

Program-by-program results will be reported to the Director Editorial Policies in aggregate form. The purpose is to provide the basis for education and professional development across a program team, a Division and, where relevant, across the whole ABC. The purpose is not to single out individuals for criticism or praise.

5. Principle 5 -- Reasonableness

Data will be assessed in light of what was reasonable to achieve in the circumstances, particularly by reference to the time or other practical pressures under which the material was gathered, produced and broadcast or published online.

6. Principle 6 -- Transparency

The design and operation of the process will be transparent and made available to the relevant Divisions in advance of implementation.

V. Methodology

A. The overall process

This methodology is based on that used for EQA Projects 2 and 6, which examined the accuracy of Radio Current Affairs and News content respectively.

As with EQA Project 6, this project consisted of four stages. However, in the light of experience with the earlier projects, Stage 1 was broadened. Assessments in those previous projects were based only on comparing the broadcast text with the documentary source material from which it had been derived. In this project, if a comparison with documentary sources was not possible, either because the document could not be found or did not exist, the reviewer contacted the source person or organisation, asked their views about the accuracy of the item and for any relevant documentary material.

The four stages were thus as follows:

- **Stage 1:** A review based on documentary source material and, where necessary, discussion with persons or organisations named in the item as sources.
- **Stage 2:** Presentation to News Division of preliminary findings, with an invitation to provide additional material and explanation.
- **Stage 3** A review by the Project Manager of the preliminary findings, taking News Division's response into account.
- Stage 4: Conclusive findings and the writing of a final report by the Project Manager.

News Division's response is reproduced in full in Appendix I.

B. Scope

The scope of this quality assurance project was confined to plain-fact and contextual accuracy of items broadcast on the ABC Radio News across networks served by News Division. It did not cover balance, fairness or impartiality, which have been treated separately in this EQA program.

The importance of factual accuracy and context, and standards for the assessment of performance in these matters, are stated in Section 5 of the ABC's Editorial Policies, specifically:

- Para 5.1.4: News records what is happening. Facts and context dominate.
- Para 5.2.1: All news and current affairs content will be accurate . . .
- Para 5.2.2 (c) (i): Every reasonable effort, in the circumstances, must be made to ensure that the factual content of news and current affairs is accurate and in context.
- Para 5.17.1: The overriding objective for the ABC is to report the facts clearly, accurately . . .

For the purposes of this study, accuracy has two elements:

1. Plain facts: names, titles, dates, amounts, and so on.

Contextual accuracy: the fidelity of the broadcast material to the context in which the facts were presented in the documentary source material, and the use of facts in a way that does justice to the range of factual material available from the documentary sources.

Factual content is defined as:

Material which conveys bare information directly verifiable by reference to a source other than the item under investigation, and not containing explanation, interpretation, analysis, or opinion.

This definition is consistent with, although not exactly the same as, that used by the Australian Communications and Media Authority.

The study did not go beyond these boundaries. It specifically did not made judgments about the overall impression created by the item, nor did it made judgments about news value, interpretation, comment, tone or semiotics.

C. Assessment criteria

The plain-fact and contextual accuracy of each item reviewed was assessed against the following scale developed for EQA Projects 2 and 6, and adopted by News Division for its own purposes:

Wholly accurate

Substantially accurate

Immaterially inaccurate

Materially inaccurate

These are defined as follows:

Wholly accurate: No apparent errors at all.

Substantially accurate: No more than one apparent error which makes no substantial difference to the overall accuracy of the information conveyed.

Immaterially inaccurate: An error or errors that are not reasonably likely to result in harm to those directly affected by the report, a material misunderstanding among listeners, or damage to the ABC's reputation.

Materially inaccurate: An error or errors that make a substantial difference to the overall accuracy of the information conveyed in that it is reasonably likely to result in harm to those directly affected by the report, material misunderstanding among listeners, or damage to the ABC's reputation.

It is recognised that there are varying degrees of harm. The threshold for the harm referred to in these definitions is that the harm would not be inconsequential. For instance, an inaccuracy may not harm a company's share price, but it may be reasonably likely to cost the company considerable time and expense to rectify the effects.

D. Process of assessment

It is acknowledged that there is some element of subjectivity in the assessments, and as in Projects 2 and 6, two reviewers were used to independently assess the accuracy of each item in a double-blind process. Items that attract discrepant assessments were reviewed by the project manager.

The reviewers read the transcripts from the broadcast and, where audio was available, listened to the items as broadcast, and compared their content with documentary source material referred to in the items or on which it was apparent the item was based.

If, after a diligent search, the reviewer could not identify or find the apparent documentary source, the reviewer contacted the persons or organisations referred to in the item and asked a number of standard questions about the accuracy of the item.

It was anticipated that in most cases it would be sufficient for the reviewer to read the item to the respondent, and this proved to be so. In a few cases, the reviewer emailed the text to the respondent or obtained documentary material from the respondent.

Based on their hearing or reading of the item, the respondent was asked:

Would you say that the item was accurate or not accurate?

If accurate: Is there any reason why I should not record this as wholly accurate?

If not accurate: In what way was it not accurate?

The inclusion in the methodology of the potential for formal contact by the reviewers with the persons or organisations referred to in the items raised the prospect that inaccuracies might be suggested that were not able readily to be checked. This might be because the respondent had an honestly held recollection of events, particularly conversations that differed from what had been reported. This remained a matter for the subsequent exchanges between the Project Manager and News Division to clarify if possible.

Two factors needed to be borne in mind. First, by the time of the project, respondents would have experienced the impact of the original reporting of the items, and those items might have had adverse effects on the respondents whether or not reported accurately or inaccurately. The subjects of news items, including and perhaps especially items reported accurately, might regard the item adversely because of the fact that it had been publicly disclosed. The subjects of reports of court proceedings are a common example. It was also possible that by the time the reviewer contacted the respondent, more facts might have become available than were available at the time of the original item. These subsequent facts might appear to affect accuracy, especially contextual accuracy. For those involved in a newsworthy event or unfolding events, it is easy to conflate facts in memory. However, it was essential for the reviewers and Project Manager to make assessments on the basis of facts that were available to those who reported the original item.

Second, the respondents would be aware that a quality assurance process was being undertaken by the ABC. In such circumstances, some respondents might, in effect, have taken the benefit of hindsight in what they told reviewers. This would be as harmful to a fair and rigorous quality assurance project into accuracy as would be the same type of response by the ABC.

To guard against it, reviewers were required to take reasonable steps to check any claimed inaccuracy by reference to appropriate sources independent of the respondent. Such sources might have included other reports on the same matter or further inquiry by the reviewer.

Experience in previous quality assurance projects (QA 3 and QA 6) gave grounds for confidence that reviewers would be able to detect *post hoc* rationalisations by respondents.

These tend to exhibit one or more of the following characteristics:

- Exceedingly fine-grained distinctions, which in fact amount to a distinction without a difference.
- A gloss on the facts that puts them in a more favourable light from the respondent's point of view without any substantive difference in content or context between the facts as provided and the facts as broadcast.
- Unexplained inconsistencies or contradictions between the claimed version and the version generally reported in the media.

Of course, media organisations might also be tempted to make *post hoc* rationalisations, and this was a factor that the News Division and the Project Manager have needed to guard against.

1. Reasonableness test

As in previous EQA accuracy projects, there was a reasonable test, which News Division was invited to consider when responding to the draft report.

The test takes into account the following factors:

- How much time did the program team member/s have to prepare the report?
- At what time of day was the report prepared?
- How much prior knowledge about the subject was available to the program team member/s at the time
 of preparing the report?
- What was the status of that knowledge?
- How much expertise did the program team member/s have in the subject-matter?
- What steps were taken by the program team member/s to verify the facts?
- What constraints, if any, existed within the program for the ventilation of the item?
- If there were constraints, to what extent did they lie within the control of the program team member/s concerned?

The application of the reasonableness test does not mean that the existence of inaccuracies are ignored, unreported or excused, but that the circumstances in which they occurred are able to be described. This is an important aspect of ensuring that quality assurance projects produce results that can be fed back into continuous improvement.

E. Database

The assessments were carried out on items broadcast in three categories of news bulletins produced by News Division and transmitted on Local Radio, Radio National, Classic FM and Coast FM.

The three categories of bulletin were:

1. Regional Local Radio weekday

2. Metro weekend

SERN/national weekend

These categories were chosen because a broader study of ABC Radio News accuracy in Project 6 showed that these categories contributed a disproportionately high number of items that were less than wholly accurate.

However, the sample sizes in that study were modest and, in the case of SERN/national, too small to allow for sensible analysis. The objective here was to see whether, with larger samples, similar patterns emerged.

The arrangements for disseminating news are set out in documents entitled *New Common Radio Spine of Bulletins* and *SERN Bulletins*. The acronym SERN means South-East Radio National. SERN bulletins refer to a news service that the ABC provides for Radio National and Classic FM listeners in regional New South Wales, regional Victoria and parts of regional Tasmania. This service is necessary because of the transmitter configuration in those areas. Importantly, these bulletins, which are produced mainly from the Adelaide newsroom, but also at times from the Perth and Sydney newsrooms, are also national (or 'bed') bulletins that are run on Radio National, Local Radio and Classic FM across the country at various times of the day and are available if there is a transmission or other problem relating to a locally produced bulletin.

A total sample of 100 items was considered adequate for this project, compared with a sample of 150 for EQA 6, which looked at a broader range of bulletins. For each category, a quota of 33 was established (34 in Regional bulletins to make up the 100). These were adequate sub-samples for the purpose, and the sampling variance was also identical across the three. This meant the level of confidence in the data for each sub-sample was the same. The small variations that ultimately occurred between the quotas make no material difference.

The items were sampled from items on domestic Australian news prepared wholly within Australia, apparently based on identifiable documentary source material, and broadcast on weekdays in Regional Local Radio bulletins and on weekends in Metro and SERN/national bulletins.

For sampling purposes it was important to keep in mind that this Quality Assurance project was directed at individual items of news. Therefore, the unit of analysis was individual items of news.

1. Sample of bulletins and items

Partly because samples of a usable size were required and partly because a comparative analysis across different categories of bulletins was not required for this project, the sample was constructed on the basis of quotas, and does not purport to replicate the actual distribution of bulletins, as the sample for Project 6 did.

a. Regional Local Radio weekday bulletins

Regional Local Radio has 47 call signs, and broadcasts via something like 50 stations (some call signs cover more than one station).

To keep the sample manageable, and to ensure that from most participating call signs there were generally at least three items, a random selection of 12 call signs was made.

Each week day, Regional Local Radio stations run at least two regional bulletins of five minutes' duration, mostly at 0730 and 1230. Some also run bulletins at other times, such as 1030 and 1730. These were the bulletins included in the study, except when what appeared to be the main morning bulletin was at 0630 or 0830, in which case the appropriate bulletin from one of those times was included.

From 10 of these call signs, three items were selected, and from a randomly selected two call signs, two items were selected for inclusion. This yielded the 34 needed for the guota.

The time period covered by the Regional Local Radio sample was from 13 February to 11 March 2009, weekdays only. The time period expanded as necessary for the researchers to accumulate sufficient items.

At weekends, Regional Local Radio stations take their news from the SERN/national bulletins, which are dealt with separately.

b. Metro weekend bulletins

There are eight capital-city newsrooms, one each in Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, Darwin, Hobart, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney. All these stations were included to ensure a comprehensive national spread.

Weekend Metro bulletins are confined to the period 0600 to 1300 each day. At other times the capital-city stations take national bulletins. For this study, two main bulletins were selected: 0745 and 1200, except in Darwin where one 0630 and two 1100 bulletins were included on the basis that they appeared to be the main bulletins of the day.

The time period from which the Metro weekend bulletins were selected ran from 14 February to 8 March 2009. It will be remembered that the earlier part of this period coincided with the aftermath of the Victorian bushfires, and much bulletin content was taken up with that coverage, little of which met the selection criteria.

Once again, the time period expanded until a minimum of four items from any one station had been found. This yielded 36 items but after overlaps had been eliminated, 33 were left, the guota needed for the study.

c. SERN/national weekend bulletins

SERN/national bulletins are produced largely in Adelaide, augmented by some from Perth and Sydney. They provide a larger proportion of the ABC's bulletins on weekends than they do on week days. During weekends, they provide the national news service to Local Radio, Radio National and Classic FM across Australia from 1400 on Saturdays and Sundays to 0400 the next day. They also contribute to the news service provided through a number of regional stations in the SERN area (as described above) during weekends.

Weekend SERN/national bulletins were chosen on the basis that they contained stories that met the selection criteria. Because qualifying stories were hard to find, a wide range of bulletins were trawled, resulting in a very widespread sample.

Perth: 2100-0200, weekends of 27 February to 1 March and 6 to 8 March (Fridays are included because late-night Friday bulletins in Perth are broadcast in the early hours of Saturday morning in eastern Australia).

Adelaide: 1400, 1600, 1700, 1900, 2000, weekends of 21-22 February, 28 February-1 March, and 7-8 March 2009.

Sydney: 0630, 0700, 0900, 1100, 1200, 1300, weekends of 14-15 February, 21-22 February, 28 February-1 March, 7-8 March.

From each locality, 11 items were selected, to give an even spread across the three SERN/national newsrooms, and a quota of 33.

d. Running items

A running item is an item that develops during the day and is broadcast in materially different versions in more than one bulletin. Because these different versions contained different factual content, a proper assessment of the factual accuracy of the item required all these versions to be assessed. However, they remained one item for the purposes of the sample.

It follows that once an item had been included in the sample, all versions of it which contain materially different factual content, and were broadcast on the day selected for the study, were included, even if they were broadcast on bulletins that fell outside the sample.

It also followed that simply because a running item from a bulletin became drawn into the sample, it did not mean that that whole bulletin was drawn in, unless it was already in the sample. It was the accuracy of items, not of bulletins, that was being assessed.

To summarise: Once an item was in, it stayed in through all its materially altered versions, even if that meant drawing it in from bulletins that otherwise lay outside the sample. And it counted as one item, no matter how many versions were assessed.

F. Data analysis procedures

A simple count was done of items falling within each criterion of accuracy, and these were reported both in raw numbers and as a proportion of the total number of items from each category.

Results were reported for each category individually and summed across all four categories as well.

Should a recurring error have occurred, for example in a running story where the error survived through more than one version it would have been counted as one error to avoid distorting the overall results. However, to make the data more useful for systemic improvement purposes, any instances of recurring errors would have been identified as such. No such errors were found.

G. Further procedures

The draft findings were circulated to News Division as described earlier. Following consideration of the News Division's responses, determinations have been made.

VI. Findings

A. The overall picture

There is a high to very high level of accuracy overall in weekend and regional ABC Radio news items, but there are four qualifications to make about this blanket statement:

- 5. The standard of plain-fact accuracy in these bulletins overall is not as high as in bulletins produced in metropolitan newsrooms on weekdays.
- 6. There is a noticeable fall-off in the standard of plain-fact accuracy in Metropolitan Weekend and Regional bulletins, compared with Metropolitan Weekday and SERN/national bulletins.
- 7. There is also a fall-off in the standard of plain-fact accuracy in SERN/national bulletins against Metro Weekday quality, but it is slight.
- 8. It is in Regional bulletins that the fall-off is most pronounced.

The differences are illustrated in Figure 6.1. The data for Metropolitan Weekday bulletins were taken from EQA Project 6 for the purpose of the comparisons.

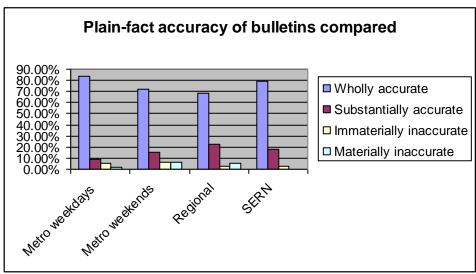


FIGURE 6.1

Of particular note is the fact that Regional bulletins contain the lowest level of wholly accurate items, and the highest level of substantially accurate items. This confirms the hypothesis in the report on EQA Project 6, which stated:

What is particularly noticeable about the regional figures is the relatively high incidence of items that are "substantially accurate" as to plain fact . . . when compared with metropolitan data. This suggests that in regional areas, journalists get it nearly right, but not quite right, somewhat more often than their metropolitan counterparts.

In EQA Project 6, these findings were presented as a hypothesis because the samples of weekend and regional items were so small that reliable estimates could not be made. The present study, EQA Project 10, with samples of between 32 and 35 items in each category, has produced more reliable estimates.

The quality of SERN/national bulletins, which was impossible to assess in the previous study, turns out to be much closer to the standard attained by Metropolitan Weekday bulletins than either of the other two categories.

1. Contextual accuracy

Figure 6.2 compares the various categories of bulletin for contextual accuracy. The standard of contextual accuracy is higher than that of plain-fact accuracy in Metro Weekend, Regional and SERN/national bulletins, and nearly as good as, or slightly better than, the standards of contextual accuracy in Metro Weekday bulletins. Once more, the standard in Regional bulletins is lower than in the other three but the difference is slight, so support for the hypothesis from EQA 6 is weak here.

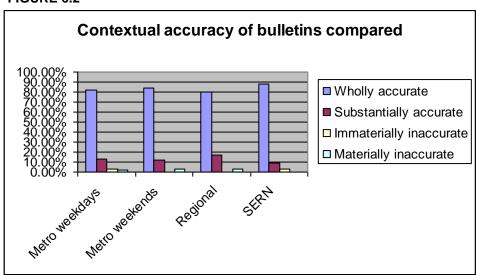


FIGURE 6.2

The overall standards of accuracy shown by this study are presented in headline form in Table 6.1. It shows the overall proportion of items found to be wholly or substantially accurate for plain facts was 92% and for context 97%. The overall proportion found to be immaterially or materially inaccurate was 8% for plain facts and 3% for context. As will be shown later, the incidence of material inaccuracy was very low: 4% for plain facts and 2% for context.

Total a	ccurate	Total ir	naccurate
Plain facts	Context	Plain facts	Context
%	%	%	%
92.0	97.0	8.0	3.0

TABLE 6.1: RATES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR TOTAL SAMPLE (n = 100)

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

Table 6.2 and Figure 6.3 break down these percentages into the four degrees of accuracy used to assess the items: wholly accurate, substantially accurate, immaterially inaccurate and materially inaccurate. These terms are defined in the methodology section of this report.

The data show that of the 100 items sampled, 73% were wholly accurate for plain facts, and a further 19% were substantially accurate. They also show that 84% were wholly accurate for context, and a further 13% substantially accurate.

Of the items sampled, 4% were immaterially inaccurate for plain facts, and 4% materially inaccurate; 1% were immaterially inaccurate for context and 2% were materially inaccurate.

Of the eight items found to be inaccurate (either immaterially or materially), three were found to be inaccurate for both plain fact and context. In all cases, it was the plain-fact error that so altered the nature of the information conveyed that it inevitably created a contextual inaccuracy because it placed the facts in a different light, or created a new context within which the listener would have assimilated the information.

TABLE 6.2: DEGREES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR TOTAL SAMPLE (n = 100)

Plain facts					Cor	ntext	
Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate	Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
73.0	19.0	4.0	4.0	84.0	13.0	1.0	2.0

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

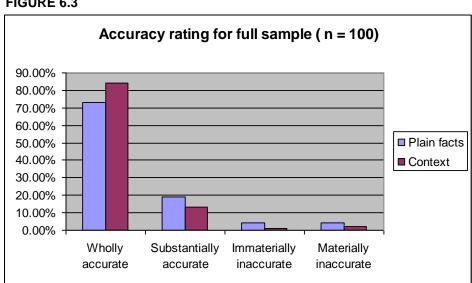


FIGURE 6.3

B. Analysis by bulletin type

The incidence of wholly accurate items in SERN/national bulletins is higher than in Metro Weekend or Regional bulletins. Findings from each category of bulletin - Metro Weekend, Regional and SERN/national -- are presented below.

1. Metro Weekend

Tables 6.3 and 6.4 and Figure 6.4 show the findings for Metropolitan Weekend bulletins. As Table 6.3 shows, accuracy rates for metropolitan bulletins are high for plain facts and very high for context. Table 6.4 breaks down these broad findings into the four degrees of accuracy. The incidence of items "immaterially inaccurate" for plain facts is higher in Metro Weekend bulletins than in the other two categories.

TABLE 6.3: RATES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR METRO WEEKEND BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 32)

Total a	ccurate	Total ir	naccurate
Plain facts	Context	Plain facts	Context
%	%	%	%
87.5	96.9	12.6	3.1

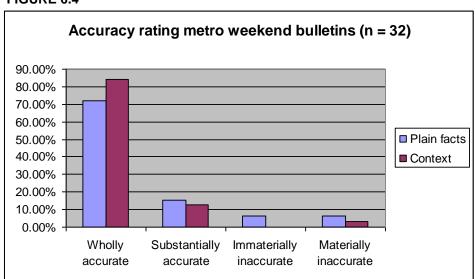
Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

TABLE 6.4: DEGREES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR METRO WEEKEND BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 32)

·	Plain facts				Context		
Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate	Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
71.9	15.6	6.3	6.3	84.4	12.5		3.1

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

FIGURE 6.4



2. Regional

The findings for Regional bulletins are given in Tables 6.5 and 6.6, and in Figure 6.5.

TABLE 6.5: RATES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR REGIONAL BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 35)

, ,					
Total a	ccurate	Total ir	naccurate		
Plain facts	Context	Plain facts	Context		
%	%	%	%		
91.5	97.1	8.6	2.9		

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

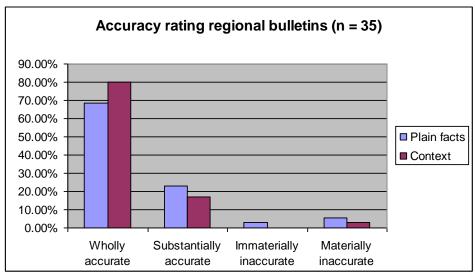
The level of *overall* accuracy in Regional bulletin items is higher than in Metropolitan Weekend bulletins. However, this masks an important difference. The incidence of "wholly accurate" items in Regional bulletins is lower than in Metro Weekend or SERN/national bulletins, and the incidence of "substantially accurate" items is higher. Table 6.6 breaks down the overall regional figures into the four degrees of accuracy.

TABLE 6.6: DEGREES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR REGIONAL BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 35)

	Plain facts				Cor	ntext	
Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate	Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
68.6	22.9	2.9	5.7	80.0	17.1		2.9

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

FIGURE 6.5



The incidence of "materially inaccurate" in Regional bulletins was lower than in Metro Weekend bulletins but higher than in SERN/national bulletins. However, the differences were slight.

SERN/national

Finally in this sequence, we present findings for SERN/national bulletins. Table 6.7 sets out the overall picture for items in SERN/national bulletins.

TABLE 6.7: RATES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR SERN/NATIONAL BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 32)

Total a	ccurate	Total ir	naccurate
Plain facts	Context	Plain facts	Context
%	%	%	%
97.0	97.0	3.0	3.0

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

Table 6.8 breaks these figures down into the four degrees of accuracy.

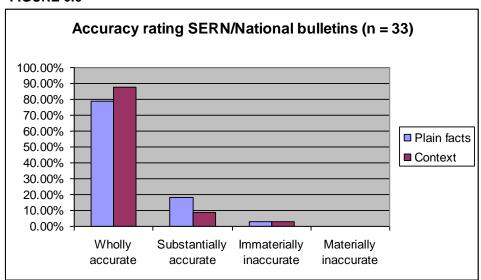
TABLE 6.8: DEGREES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR SERN/NATIONAL BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 32)

Plain facts				Cor	ntext		
Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate	Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
78.8	18.2	3.0		87.9	9.1	3.0	

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

SERN/national bulletins had a higher standard of plain-fact and contextual accuracy than either of the other categories, and had clearly the highest incidence of "wholly accurate" items. Figure 6.6 shows the accuracy rating for SERN/national bulletin items on the four-point accuracy scale.

FIGURE 6.6



C. Nature of inaccuracies

In this section we look more closely at those items classified as either immaterially or materially inaccurate for plain facts or context. To assist in understanding the nature of all the inaccuracies found, a typology was developed. There were three types:

- 1. **Imprecision**: Errors of fact; careless or ambiguous expression; failure to appreciate important distinctions or the actual meaning conveyed; mishandling of figures.
- 2. Pushing it: Nudging the facts or presenting data in a way designed to achieve an exaggerated effect.
- 3. **Error creep:** The effect of a combination of factors such as unwarranted assumptions, relying on second-hand information, misattribution, and incremental paraphrasis.

We found some of these too in EQA Projects 2 and 6. As we have noted previously, they are commonplace in journalism, perhaps even endemic, but that does not make them right.

In this study, as in EQA Projects 2 and 6, we found no evidence of serious professional dishonesty: no flagrant misrepresentation, no invention of material. Nor was there any evidence of serious incompetence or recklessness of the kind that results in gross errors. The material sampled was clearly the product of best endeavours by competent professional journalists of unquestioned integrity. This remained true even where mistakes had been made; so much is evident from the nature of the mistakes.

This study did reveal, however, a tendency by some reporters to mishandle figures. No fewer than five items among the eight found to be immaterially or materially inaccurate involved the mishandling of numeric data.

Our own experience in the profession has exposed us to the lack of confidence many journalists feel when confronted by numbers. The fact that so many errors of this kind got through in this sample might be explained in part by this.

Broader organisational factors might also be at work. Our experience inclines us to think that the patterns revealed in this study largely reflect the exigencies of budgets and rosters. It comes as no surprise that standards at weekends and in regions tend to be lower than in weekday metropolitan newsrooms because, in news organisations generally, staffing at weekends and in regions tends to be thinner, less experienced and less well supervised than would ordinarily be the case in a weekday metropolitan newsroom.

Quite a number of the errors detected here might have been picked up by vigilant, sceptical and numerate subediting or editing. These capacities are not acquired overnight and are not easily maintained across a sevenday roster and a nation-wide news-gathering operation. The seemingly inexorable speeding up and intensifying of the news cycle is likely to see the challenges of maintaining standards increase rather than diminish.

The errors found are described in Tables 6.9 and 6.10.

TABLE 6.9: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY

ITEM	M13	NATURE OF INACCURACY
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro Weekend	Plain fact: The item describes Garth Agius as a linguist. He says he is not a linguist, but the co-
DATE	1/3/09	ordinator of the Katherine Regional Language Centre.
TITLE	Lost languages 3am sun	

TABLE 6.9: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY continued

	OF IMMATERIAL INACCORAC	
ITEM	M14	Plain fact. The item refers to a new daily water target that the item says has been set for
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro Weekend	Canberra "residents" but it is for the whole of Canberra and not just residents. The item says the
DATE	1/3/09	target "for each person" is to use less than 112 megalitres per day. The target is for the whole of
TITLE	Water target sun	Canberra, not per person.
ITEM BULLETIN TYPE	R22 Regional	Plain fact. The item refers to the state's agricultural areas suffering a "severe rainfall deficiency", and is based on a Government
DATE	5/3/09	statement about the drought. The definition is important because it is based on a
TITLE	Drought statement 2	specific rainfall level. "Severe" deficiency is rainfall in the lowest 5% range. "Serious" deficiency is defined as rainfall "in the lowest 10% of historical records but not in the lowest 5%".
		The Government's drought statement refers to "most of" the state's agricultural areas experiencing "serious to severe deficiencies". By using only the term "severe", and by leaving out the qualifying phrase "most of", the item makes the conditions seem worse and more widespread than they are.
ITEM	S10	Plain fact and contextual. The item states that Professor Capon "blames" successive governments for their half-hearted and unco-
BULLETIN TYPE	SERN/national	ordinated efforts to stop the spread of the cane toad into the Kimberleys.
DATE	21/2/09	The item is derived in part from a Stateline
TITLE	Cane toads AM 3	program that paraphrases Professor Capon as saying successive governments have been half-hearted about the cane toad. The program's introduction refers to "scientists" blaming government ineptitude.
		The Radio News item says that Professor Capon had told Stateline that the toads would have a dramatic and irreversible impact on the Kimberleys. In fact this observation was made by a Stateline reporter and was not attributed to anyone.
		Professor Capon told the EQA reviewer that he had made it clear at the end of his interview with Stateline that while cane toads represented a huge problem, he was not laying the blame on the government. Rather, it was a question of creating a co-ordinated response.

Professor Capon told the reviewer that the Radio News item was inaccurate.
It would seem that if indeed an inaccuracy has occurred, it arose from a combination of misattribution and incremental paraphrasis, and by an apparently unwarranted assumption that the "scientists" referred to in Stateline was code for Professor Capon.

TABLE 6.10: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY

TABLE 6.10: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY		
ITEM	м5	Plain fact and contextual. The item states that data released by the Australian Drug
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro Weekend	Foundation and obtained from Nielsen, show a reduction in consumption of
DATE	8/3/09	alcopops of 310 standard drinks in the first nine or ten months since the introduction of
TITLE	Alcopops figures	the increased excise on alcopops.
		In fact, the data showed a reduction of 310 million standard drinks.
		In the context of the political controversy surrounding this issue, an error of this magnitude is likely to have caused a material misunderstanding among the public, affecting the light in which the facts and the various arguments might be seen.
		Moreover, the item stated that there had been a drop of 28% in sales of alcopops in the period April 2008 to January 2009.
		In fact the figure of 28% was the month-on- month drop in alcopops sales in January 2009 compared with January 2008. The drop for the April 2008 to January 2009 period was 29%.

TABLE 6.10: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY continued

TABLE 6.10: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY continued		
ITEM	M30	Plain fact and contextual. The item stated: "The Defence Department is under pressure to
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro Weekend	release a report which says thousands of kangaroos have died of starvation at the
DATE	28/2/09	Majura Training Site in the ACT."
TITLE	Defence kangaroos 2	This appears to be based on a <i>Canberra Times</i> report. The newspaper report was later said to be wrong (see below). That there was no Defence Department report was confirmed too in a reviewer's interview with Michael Linke of the RSPCA ACT. He said there had been observations of kangaroo deaths but no report.
		This consequently calls into question the assertion in the item that the Department was under "pressure" to release it. This may be no more than an assumption by the reporter, based on the premise that there was a report, coupled with the fact that there was a public debate about the issue.
		The Department told a reviewer that regular monitoring of the site showed that in November 2008 there were more than 9000 kangaroos there, almost triple its recognised carrying capacity.
		Figures like these place the issue of starvation in a very different light.
		The ABC reported on Tuesday 10 March 2009:
		Doubt has been cast on claims that 5,000 kangaroos had starved to death at the Majura defence site on the outskirts of Canberra. Media reports last week suggested the information about a food shortage came from a Department of Defence report. A newspaper article said the kangaroo population at Majura had exploded from 6,000 to 9,000 in the last year. But Canberra RSPCA chief Michael Linke says the Defence Department has told him there is no such report.
		There appears to have been no acknowledgement of the ABC's apparent perpetuation of the error. However, this statement is made tentatively and News Division is invited to respond to it. For News Division response see Appendix 1.

TABLE 6.10: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY continued

TABLE 0:10: INOTANOES	OF MATERIAL INACCURACT CO	
ITEM BULLETIN TYPE DATE	R29 Regional 6/3/09	Plain fact. The item states that <u>live cattle</u> exports were up 20% for February to almost 200,000 head. The MLA press release dated 4 February states that live cattle exports for the whole of 2008 were up 20% to almost 870,000 head, a record.
TITLE	Record beef am 1	It seemed improbable that one month's exports could amount to nearly a quarter of a full year's, and indeed Tim McRae (who had been interviewed in the item) could not say, when asked by the reviewer, where the figure of 200,000 had come from. He said that it was "way too high", and added that the live cattle export figures for February would not be released until April (about a month after this item went to air).
		There was another MLA press release on 6 March saying that <u>beef</u> exports were up 20% year-on-year in February, and Mr McRae speculated that the ABC item "spliced the two stories together" – live cattle exports and beef exports. This seems a reasonable hypothesis.
ITEM	R46	Plain fact. The item states: "The group's Chief Executive Gary Kerr says about 72% of
BULLETIN TYPE	Regional	businesses have either increased or seen no change in their turnover."
TITLE	5/3/09 Business confidence 2	The executive summary of the survey states: "The survey results indicated a high degree of resilience in the business sector of the Rockhampton region where around 60% of businesses indicated their activity had increased or remained the same in the last 12 months"
		It also said: "A significant number of businesses (72%) indicated they had some degree of confidence in their business performance for 2009."
		The figure of 72% has been misapplied, giving an inflated impression of the level of business turnover in the period covered by the survey.

ABC Editorial Policies	S			
	I. NEWC DIVIC	ION'S RESPO	NSE TO INITIA	L DRAFT
	S AND PROJEC			

APPENDIX I: NEWS DIVISION'S RESPONSE TO INITIAL DRAFT FINDINGS AND PROJECT MANAGER'S DETERMINATIONS

EDITORIAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

PROJECT 10: ACCURACY

RESPONSE FROM NEWS DIVISION

The News Division welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the draft report for this project. This paper responds to some of the specific findings in the draft and makes a general comment about the project. It has been put together with the assistance of the relevant News Editors from around the country, in consultation with reporters and producers involved in the stories where the draft report found instances of inaccuracies.

One issue that was raised in the responses to this draft related to the part of the methodology where the reviewers contact people involved in the stories (either as talent or, for instance, they were responsible for a document quoted in a story). A regional journalist raised concerns about this. He said:

'In a local community, sources learn to trust and value their news media, accepting that from time to time there may stories critical of the organisations they represent. It takes a lot of time and effort to build up these relationships that can be undone by unsolicited contact by "strangers" who seem to be questioning their version of events. I'm concerned that someone purporting to represent the ABC can contact one of our sources to question them about the story we ran. [The contact] says he received several phone calls from what he describes as "some woman from a university in Melbourne" about the story in which he's quoted ... How does unsolicited contact by someone said to represent the ABC affect our sources in the future, if they fear being contacted by someone to question them about their story?'

Specific responses are in the attached table.

Project Manager's response to this general point

The regional journalist has raised three concerns:

- 1. The risk that relationships with sources, painstakingly built up, could be undone by what is called "unsolicited" contact by reviewers.
- 2. The uncertainty created in the mind of one source about what the reviewer was doing and for whom.
- 3. The risk that such contact may generate fear among sources that they are going to be questioned about the story in which they figured or for which they were the source.

These concerns are taken seriously.

Point 2 indicates that the introduction used by at least one reviewer did not make it clear what the purpose of the call was, and on whose behalf the call was being made.

ABC Editorial Policies

This was the first time reviewers were given the option of contacting sources as part of an Accuracy project. All the reviewers on this panel had prior experience of assisting with an Accuracy project. Some also had prior experience in contacting sources as part of an Impartiality project, but not all had had that experience.

In the light of this concern raised by the journalist, an introductory script should have been supplied by the Project Manager to the reviewers so that anyone needing it could use it to make clear the purpose and provenance of the call.

This was an oversight for which the Project Manager apologises. In any future EQA project where sources are contacted, an introductory script should be provided to all reviewers so that the risk identified by the journalist here is eliminated.

Points 1 and 3 might also be addressed, at least in part, by the use of an introductory script. However, the journalist seems to be making a larger point here.

The larger point seems to be that contact with sources of itself somehow places relationships with sources at risk by engendering a sense that the purpose of the call is to challenge the source's own veracity or credibility.

It is emphasised that this is only a speculative interpretation, and the Project Manager, through the proper channels, is anxious to explore it further. If necessary, steps will be taken in any future study involving contact with sources to dispel any such misinterpretation by providing reviewers with a standardised statement of purpose.

Our reviewers' general experience, however, is that sources are more likely to make a statement of admiration about the quality of ABC reporters' work, and congratulate the ABC for conducting the check.

Only one negative statement about the process was reported by the reviewers, and it concerned a complaint from a source that he had received something like eight phone calls from the reviewing pair. Subsequent inquiries revealed that both reviewers of the item in question had had difficulty obtaining a response from that source and had each made more than one phone call to him. Whether they added up to eight is not a matter that can be firmly established. It would be unusual.

One final point: It is so rare for a media organisation in Australia to conduct reviews like this that it sometimes takes people by surprise. This became clear during Project 3 (Impartiality of News Content). Some of the respondents – especially those experienced in dealing with media – could scarcely believe their ears when they were first approached, and had to verify that the call was genuine before they would proceed.

This does not reflect well on the profession.

The ABC's QA work is innovative and for that reason alone is likely to raise unforeseen challenges. That is no excuse, however, for not taking as many precautions as possible to guard against the risks outlined by the regional journalist. We thank him for taking the trouble of raising them, and we would like to explore them further if News Division saw fit.

TABLE 6.9: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY		
ITEM	M13	NATURE OF INACCURACY
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro Weekend	Plain fact: The item describes Garth Agius as a linguist. He says he is not a linguist, but the co-ordinator of the
DATE	1/3/09	Katherine Regional Language Centre.
TITLE	Lost languages 3am sun	News reply: Nothing to add.
Story:	Northern Territory	
Bulletin:	Canberra 0745	
Determination: The	draft finding stands.	
ITEM	M14	Plain fact. The item refers to a new daily water target that the item says has been set for Canberra "residents"
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro Weekend	but it is for the whole of Canberra and not just residents. The item says the target "for each person" is to use less
DATE	1/3/09	than 112 megalitres per day. The target is for the whole of Canberra, not per person.
TITLE	Water target sun	News reply: A check of the original press release
Story:	ACT	shows that the figure of 112 megalitres per day should have applied to the whole territory and not
Bulletin:	Canberra 0745	individual usage. The wording was slightly ambiguous referring to the "city's daily usage needs" without stating specifically if that meant the entire city of Canberra or the usage by individuals. However, the reporter now acknowledges that 112 megalitres per day could not realistically refer to individual consumption.
		ACT News says the reporter used "residents" in the first paragraph to refer in a wider sense to include businesses and industry.
Determination: The	draft finding stands.	
ITEM	M19	Plain fact. The item says: "And today's opening
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro Weekend	coincides with the 5 th anniversary this month of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital."
DATE	1/3/09	It was the 50 th anniversary, as stated in the Minister's media release dated 1 March 2009, which also stated:
TITLE	QEH opening	"The first general patients were admitted to the QEH on Tuesday 3 March 1959."
Story:	SA	News reply: The audio is not available, but the
Bulletin:	Adelaide 1200	journalist recalls that when she filed this voice report from the field she correctly referred to the 50 th anniversary. The error appears to be a typo in the transcript.

Determination: The reporter's word is accepted, and the item is reassessed as wholly accurate. The reviewers too could not obtain the audio.

ITEM M21

BULLETIN TYPE Metro Weekend

DATE 7/3/09

TITLE Planning comment AM2

Story: TAS

Bulletin: Hobart 0745

Plain fact and contextual. This item concerned changes to the Tasmanian planning system. It was based on two media releases: Planning reform agenda, issued on March 3, and Amalgamation to streamline Planning System, issued on March 4.

The changes include an amalgamation of the Resource Planning and Development Commission (RPDC) with staff at the Land Use Planning Branch, creating a new Tasmanian Planning Commission.

The item says: "The Government's review of the planning system recommends the Resource Planning and Development Commission stop seeking public input on draft proposals." However, the media release states that under the new Commission, public consultation would be conducted by a panel of experts.

While the media releases are replete with political double-speak, and it seems likely that the public consultation processes will be diluted, it is inaccurate to say that public input will be stopped.

News reply:

This story was not solely based on the press releases. The minister was unavailable for an interview but the reporter spoke to the minister's press secretary, who provided confirmation that the minister had accepted a number of recommendations.

The press secretary, Margaret Lindley, said the minister could be quoted accepting the recommendation that there would be no public consultation on "draft" proposals.

The story said that a "stage" of the public consultation would be axed from the RPDC and this is what happened.

The News Editor in Tasmania disagrees that there was any inaccuracy and says perhaps the reporter should have quoted a spokeswoman for the minister.

Determination: The finding of immaterial inaccuracy is withdrawn and the item is reassessed as substantially accurate.

TABLE 6.9: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY continued

ITEM	R22	Plain fact. The item refers to the state's agricultural areas suffering a "severe rainfall deficiency", and is
BULLETIN TYPE	Regional	based on a Government statement about the drough
DATE	5/3/09	The definition is important because it is based on a specific rainfall level. "Severe" deficiency is rainfall in
TITLE	Drought statement 2	the lowest 5% range. "Serious" deficiency is defined as rainfall "in the lowest 10% of historical records but not
Story:	SA	in the lowest 5%".
Bulletin:	Port Pirie 0730	The Government's drought statement refers to "most of" the state's agricultural areas experiencing "serious to severe deficiencies".
		By using only the term "severe", and by leaving out the qualifying phrase "most of", the item makes the conditions seem worse and more widespread than they are.
		News reply: Nothing to add
Determination: The	draft finding stands.	
ITEM	S10	Plain fact and contextual. The item states that
BULLETIN TYPE	SERN/national	Professor Capon "blames" successive governments for their half-hearted and unco-ordinated efforts to stop the spread of the cane toad into the Kimberleys.
DATE	21/2/09	oprodu or ano samo toda ano ano rambono, or
TITLE	Cane toads AM 3	The item is derived in part from a Stateline program that paraphrases Professor Capon as saying successive governments have been half-hearted about
Story:	WA	the cane toad. The program's introduction refers to "scientists" blaming government ineptitude.
Bulletin:	Perth 0200	The Radio News item says that Professor Capon had told Stateline that the toads would have a dramatic and irreversible impact on the Kimberleys. In fact this observation was made by a Stateline reporter and was not attributed to anyone.
		Professor Capon told the EQA reviewer that he had made it clear at the end of his interview with Stateline that while cane toads represented a huge problem, he was not laying the blame on the government. Rather, it was a question of creating a co-ordinated response.
		Professor Capon told the reviewer that the Radio News item was inaccurate.
		It would seem that if indeed an inaccuracy has occurred, it arose from a combination of misattribution and incremental paraphrasis, and by an apparently unwarranted assumption that the "scientists" referred to

	in Stateline was code for Professor Capon.
	News reply: Nothing to add.
Determination: The draft finding stands.	

Determination: The draft finding stands.			
TABLE 6.9: INSTA	TABLE 6.9: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY continued		
ITEM	S22	Plain fact. This item is based on a media release titled	
BULLETIN TYPE	SERN/national	Findings from major study of bone health, a study of 1705 men aged 70 years and over.	
DATE	22/3/09	The item states: "Of the 1700 men studied in The Concord Health and Aging in Men Project, more than a	
TITLE	Men osteoporosis 2	quarter suffered from the disease."	
Story:	NSW	However, the media release states that "The study found that 1 in 4 of the men aged over 80 years had	
Bulletin:	Sydney 1100	had some of bone fracture in their back", and not 1 in 4 of the 1705 men in the study, as the item says. Men aged over 80 are clearly a sub-population of the total, although the item does not say what proportion they represent.	
		In overstating the proportion of men in the study who had been found to suffer from osteoporosis, the report suggests that the incidence of the disease is greater than it really is.	
		Note: The ABC transcript also apparently misspelt the researcher's name. The transcript spelling was "Kerin Blisher (BLIGH-sha)", whereas in the media release it was spelled "Kerrin Bleicher". This made no difference to the accuracy of the radio report, which was audio only, but it had the potential to create an error in any online presentation of the material.	
		News reply: The basic criticism of this story is that the reporter exaggerated the proportion of elderly men suffering osteoporosis. The story said it found that 1 in 4 suffered the disease. The assessor picked up on the fact that the news release said that 1 in 4 men over 80 suffered bone fractures. The assessor argued that men over 80 were a subset of the total study and therefore the overall figure would have been less than 1 in 4. However, the press release (see the media release at the end of this doc) also states that 1 in 4 of all men in the survey were eligible for government supported osteoporosis treatment. The NSW News Editor believes that the main conclusion of the story is therefore reasonable. The secondary criticism that the talent's name is incorrectly spelled appears to be correct.	

(See the media release at the	end of this
document.)	

Determination: The draft finding is withdrawn and the item is re-assessed as substantially accurate. In fact, a reading of the media release shows that what distinguished the over-80 group was the incidence of fractures to the back. The incidence there was 1 in 4. Moreover, 1 in 4 of men over 70 in the study are said to be eligible for Medicare-supported treatments for osteoporosis, so it follows that the ratio in the total study must be 1 in 4.

TABLE 6.10: INSTA	NCES OF MATERIAL INACCUR	ACY
ITEM	M5	Plain fact and contextual. The item states that data
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro Weekend	released by the Australian Drug Foundation and obtained from Nielsen, show a reduction in consumption of alcopops of 310 standard drinks in the
DATE	8/3/09	first nine or ten months since the introduction of the increased excise on alcopops.
TITLE	Alcopops figures	In fact, the data showed a reduction of 310 million
Story:	NSW	standard drinks.
Bulletin:	Sydney 1200	In the context of the political controversy surrounding this issue, an error of this magnitude is likely to have caused a material misunderstanding among the public, affecting the light in which the facts and the various arguments might be seen.
		Moreover, the item stated that there had been a drop of 28% in sales of alcopops in the period April 2008 to January 2009.
		In fact the figure of 28% was the month-on-month drop in alcopops sales in January 2009 compared with January 2008. The drop for the April 2008 to January 2009 period was 29%.
		News reply: This story was written in a rush to get it into the midday bulletin. The story was filed at 11.55 and the key interview was not obtained until about 11.45. The reporter acknowledges that the mistake was because of the rush and a misreading of the press release. Other versions of this story which were run on the day did not contain the figure and were correct.
Determination : The	draft finding stands.	

TABLE 6.10: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY continued

ITEM M30

BULLETIN TYPE | Metro Weekend

DATE 28/2/09

TITLE Defence kangaroos 2

Story: ACT

Bulletin: Perth 1000

Plain fact and contextual. The item stated: "The Defence Department is under pressure to release a report which says thousands of kangaroos have died of starvation at the Majura Training Site in the ACT."

This appears to be based on a *Canberra Times* report. The newspaper report was later said to be wrong (see below). That there was no Defence Department report was confirmed too in a reviewer's interview with Michael Linke of the RSPCA ACT. He said there had been observations of kangaroo deaths but no report.

This consequently calls into question the assertion in the item that the Department was under "pressure" to release it. This may be no more than an assumption by the reporter, based on the premise that there was a report, coupled with the fact that there was a public debate about the issue.

The Department told a reviewer that regular monitoring of the site showed that in November 2008 there were more than 9000 kangaroos there, almost triple its recognised carrying capacity.

Figures like these place the issue of starvation in a very different light.

The ABC reported on Tuesday 10 March 2009:

Doubt has been cast on claims that 5,000 kangaroos had starved to death at the Majura defence site on the outskirts of Canberra. Media reports last week suggested the information about a food shortage came from a Department of Defence report. A newspaper article said the kangaroo population at Majura had exploded from 6,000 to 9,000 in the last year. But Canberra RSPCA chief Michael Linke says the Defence Department has told him there is no such report.

There appears to have been no acknowledgement of the ABC's apparent perpetuation of the error. However, this statement is made tentatively and News Division is invited to respond to it.

News reply: Dealing with the apology first: for some reason this apology was not run in Canberra bulletins and it's unclear where it originated. As will be seen from the reporter's notes below she was rostered off for a week after the original item was run and therefore did not follow up the story herself. While there was no explicit statement of the ABC's role in perpetuating the story, the ACT

News Editor believes it's fair to assume that people would recognise that the ABC story was among "media reports" cited in the apology. ABC News would be unlikely to run a clarification for a story we had not previously run ourselves.

On the substance of the finding that there was no defence report in existence, the reporter submits the following points:

"The story was in the Canberra Times – that is where I sourced it.

I rang the Defence department media spokesman and said I was ringing about the story in the Canberra Times about a department report on the kangaroo situation at the Majura Training Range.

He did not say the CT was wrong and that the report didn't exist. Instead he confirmed some of the key information in the story.

I asked him to confirm the claim at the heart of the Canberra Times story that kangaroo numbers had exploded from six thousand to nine thousand over the previous 12 months and that thousands had starved to death.

He confirmed the first part – that numbers had increased to nine thousand, when the site can only hold four thousand.

On the starvation claim, he said he'd get back to me. He didn't get back to me by the time our final local bulletin went to air at midday.

At no point did he say that there was no report. Because he verified part of the newspapers claim, I did not question whether the report existed.

Because I was rostered on that Saturday, and wasn't on duty again until the following weekend, I was unable to personally follow the story through, so did not write any corrections."

It should also be noted that the RSPCA interviewee clearly stated to the reporter that he was seeking the report – and this was confirmed in a subsequent story the same morning – hence the reasonable assertion that the Defence Department was "under pressure" to release it. The interviewee also gave credence to the possibility of the kangaroo deaths in the following cart grab from the second story:

"If we've had five thousand kangaroos die now, that's double the estimate of what should have happened as part of a humane cull. For Defence to allow this number of kangaroos to starve and perish is reprehensible, and that type of number nine thousand kangaroos is way beyond the carrying capacity of that area."

It is not improbable that the man from the RSPCA was backing away from his comments when contacted by the accuracy project researchers if he'd subsequently found out there was no such report.

Determination: The draft finding stands.

TABLE 6.10: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY continued

ITEM	R9	Plain fact and contextual. The item states that figures from the Real Estate Institute of NSW show renting
BULLETIN TYPE	Regional	versus purchase prices.
DATE	9/3/09	However, the Institute has confirmed that it releases data only for rental properties, so it is assumed that the
TITLE	Rental up 12.30	information about purchases has been attributed wrongly and is fact from the NSW Housing Rent and
Story:	NSW	Sales report which was issued by the Housing Minister David Borger on March 8.
Bulletin:	Tamworth 1230	The item contains an assertion that it is "cheaper to buy than rent" in parts of New England and north-western NSW. However, a calculation based on the information from the two documents raises questions about the accuracy of this assertion.
		The item states that a 3-bedroom property in Tamworth now rents for around \$250 a week, and that this is a rise of \$20 a week from 12 months ago.
		The Rent and Sales report says the median rental for all three-bedroom dwellings in Tamworth was \$250, a rise of 4.2%. This means the previous price before the rise was \$239.92, or \$240 in round numbers. Thus the increase was about \$10, not \$20.
		The rise in rents was therefore exaggerated, and this in turn throws doubt on the statement that it is "cheaper to buy than rent".
		Depending on the data about purchase prices, a more accurate statement might have been: "House prices are going down and rental prices are going up".

News reply: The criticism of this story is based on the content of the original news release by the Real Estate Institute of Australia. There is insufficient information in the release to support the story that was written and the assessor wrongly assumes that the reporter used other information from the Department of Housing which was available to the assessor. What actually happened is that the Real Estate Institute of Australia report on rent increases was reported in the Sydney Morning Herald that morning and the reporter endeavoured to localise it by contacting the local President of the Institute. The reporter used the original release and information given by her local contact, the Vice-Chair of the New England REIA, Graeme Mills, to pull together the story. The story carefully says local rents have increased by as much as seven per cent; the figures quoted by the assessor come from a report that was not seen by the reporter. Mr Mills is happy to stand by the information he gave and confirm that the reporting of it was fair and accurate.

Determination: The draft finding is withdrawn and the item re-assessed as wholly accurate.

TABLE 6.10: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY continued

ITEM	R29	Plain fact. The item states that <u>live cattle</u> exports were up 20% for February to almost 200,000 head.		
BULLETIN TYPE	Regional	The MLA press release dated 4 February states that		
DATE	6/3/09	live cattle exports for the whole of 2008 were up 20% to almost 870,000 head, a record.		
TITLE	Record beef am 1			
Story:	WA	It seemed improbable that one month's exports could amount to nearly a quarter of a full year's, and indeed Tim McRae (who had been interviewed in the item)		
Bulletin:	Karratha 0630	could not say, when asked by the reviewer, where the figure of 200,000 had come from. He said that it was "way too high", and added that the live cattle export figures for February would not be released until April (about a month after this item went to air).		
		There was another MLA press release on 6 March saying that <u>beef</u> exports were up 20% year-on-year in February, and Mr McRae speculated that the ABC item "spliced the two stories together" – live cattle exports and beef exports. This seems a reasonable hypothesis.		
		News reply: Nothing to add.		
Determination: The draft finding stands.				

TABLE 6.10: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY continued

ITEM	R46	Plain fact. The item states: "The group's Chief		
BULLETIN TYPE	Regional	Executive Gary Kerr says about 72% of businesses have either increased or seen no change in their turnover."		
DATE	5/3/09			
TITLE	Business confidence 2	The executive summary of the survey states: "The survey results indicated a high degree of resilience in the business sector of the Rockhampton region where		
Story:	Qld	around 60% of businesses indicated their activity had increased or remained the same in the last 12 months.		
Bulletin:	Rockhampton 1730			
		It also said: "A significant number of businesses (72%) indicated they had some degree of confidence in their business performance for 2009."		
		The figure of 72% has been misapplied, giving an inflated impression of the level of business turnover in the period covered by the survey.		
		News reply: Nothing to add.		
Determination: The draft finding stands.				

Media Release

Sunday 22 March 2009

Contact: Ian Muchamore, IM Thinking, 0415 551 705

Breaking News - Findings from major study of bone health

Many bone fractures in older Australian men are not being picked up or treated. Even small fractures are an indicator of underlying osteoporosis and a warning that a more serious life threatening break may be on the way.

The findings will be presented on Sunday at an international bone health meeting in Sydney. Almost 1000 clinicians, researchers and international experts in bone health will attend the meeting.

The CHAMP study of over 1700 older men in Sydney study has used bone density testing and scans of the spine to assess bone health and fracture history.

The first results from the major study have revealed that many fractures go undetected and untreated. The study found that 1 in 4 of the men aged over 80 years had had some form of bone fracture in their back.

Researcher Kerrin Bleicher, from the Unversity of Sydney, commented that "Small fractures in the back can occur in older men from simple actions such as bending over, picking up a grandchild, slipping and falling. The man may feel some back pain but not realise he has a fracture."

Having even a relatively minor osteoporotic fracture increases the likelihood of further major and life threatening breaks such a hip fracture. Further, the consequences of a hip fracture are often more serious for men than for women.

The study also found that 1 in 4 of men aged over 70 were eligible for Medicare supported treatments for osteoporosis. However less than 1 in 10 of those eligible, for supported treatment, was actually receiving it.

Further Information

The 2nd Joint Meeting of the International Bone and Mineral Society and the Australian and New Zealand Bone and Mineral Society will be held at the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre from 21-25 March 2009. Almost 1000 delegates are expected to attend.

Presentation Sunday 2pm. Abstract #307. Prevalence and treatment of osteoporosis in older Australian men findings from the CHAMP study . K. Bleicher, V. Naganathan, M. J. Seibel, P. N. Sambrook, R. G. Cumming. CERA and School of Public Health, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia

The Concord Health and Ageing in Men Project (CHAMP) is one of the world's largest and most comprehensive studies of the health of older men. CHAMP involves 1705 men aged 70 years and older recruited from the community living near Concord Hospital in Sydney's inner west. Opportunities may be available for media to photo individual men who have participated in the CHAMP study.