

Medical News Report

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Patients and Press

Governor injured in car crash, reporters have many questions

What an extraordinary story: the governor who is driving himself, is badly injured, the state police try to hide details from reporters, and then callers to the television stations insist a woman was involved.

The media relations team at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson focused on the medical information, while non-medical questions and controversy developed elsewhere.

“Reporters have a lot of questions about the crash we can’t answer. It didn’t take long for them to figure out that’s not what we do, and that’s not what we know about,” says Jim Albritton, the media coordinator at the medical center.

The accident happened on Election Day. Albritton had just arrived home. He recalls, “I got a page about six o’clock. They said the governor had been in a car wreck. They were trying to get the helicopter to pick him up.”

Mississippi Governor Kirk Fordice had been driving—apparently alone—on Interstate 55, returning from Memphis at about 4 or 4:30 in the afternoon. Suddenly, his Jeep veered off the road, overturned several times and burst into flames.

Motorists pulled him from the wreckage and tried to give first aid. They did their best until an ambulance arrived a half-hour later. There was no law enforcement assistance.

The governor was critically injured.

It is rare for a state’s chief executive to drive himself. It is rare for one to be without security.

“Apparently, the governor had told his security people that he wanted to go up to Memphis to check on some personal business, and advised them that he didn’t need any security,” says Dennis Smith, news director of WLBT-TV in Jackson.

Despite that, some security officers followed him to the general area. They didn’t know exactly where he was.

“His security people were about three miles ahead of him on the road. When he radioed that he was coming back into Mississippi, they assumed that they were behind him. They were trying to catch up,” says Smith.

While the security detail was moving south, he was trapped in his burning car north of them.

PR had dealt with a similar accident

Albritton arrived at the ER about 6:30 p.m. It wasn’t long before news microwave trucks were set up outside. Satellite news trucks arrived from Memphis. Local, state and national news people were calling on the phones. He wouldn’t get a break until 3 or 4 the next morning.

The director and associate director of the public affairs unit were away at a conference. Albritton and colleague Tena McKenzie dealt with the mass of media.

It helped that they had just been through something similar. The lieutenant governor had been in an automobile accident in February.

“This time we had a road map for what we were going to do,” says Albritton. When the governor arrived, the emergency was handled pretty much the same way as the earlier case. The medical center team knew where to put the governor’s staff.

“When the lieutenant governor was here, it was crowded. The first couple of days the governor was in, you couldn’t move out in the hall by our office,” he says.

There were many more reporter calls from around the country. McKenzie dealt with them selectively. The volume was so great that the two of them could have spent the whole evening doing nothing but answering the national calls.

Initial details were released gradually

Albritton anticipated that the governor’s people would want full, factual release of whatever medical information became available.

It turned out he was right. “We weren’t trying to paint anything one way or another. If he’s got rib fractures, he’s got rib fractures,” he says.

The first thing Albritton told the gathered reporters was how Fordice was being brought to the medical center. Fog stopped the helicopter from flying to him. Instead, he was driven by ambulance. “The helicopter had gone to Carthage. A girl had a head injury. They were going to stabilize her and

go on to pick up the governor. However, with the fog, they just flew back with her,” he says.

Later, there was some early medical information that he could give out. “When they left Grenada, it was ‘serious but stable.’ When he got here it was really more critical than that. Information trickled out. We released what we knew,” he explains.

Eventually, the governor’s representatives had time to discuss what he had been doing.

The physicians briefed reporters at 1:50 a.m. at the emergency room.

Updates offered online, by recording

The next two days there were morning and afternoon news conferences.

After that, news was released as it developed. To reduce the pressure of repeating the same material over and over to reporters, the public affairs staffers subsequently did two things:

--They established a telephone hotline with a recording providing the latest on the governor’s condition.

--They utilized their Web site. Reporters simply had to check either source whenever it was convenient for them. “The Web page ended up helping a lot. They could just log in,” says Janis Quinn, the associate director of public affairs.

This has helped all reporters know that they will be getting what everyone else is, all the information.

Story had many non-medical questions

After the first night, news people began to develop the story more fully. Their interest in

what already was a very unusual case was whetted by state police prohibiting photographs of the ruined jeep.

The television news teams prepared to shoot video of the wrecked Jeep, but they received a nasty response.

“When we called up there trying to get shots of the vehicle that night and the next morning, we were met with extreme hostility by the state troopers at Batesville, where the Jeep had been taken. They said if we showed up there, we would be arrested,” says Smith, of WLBT.

With the police concealing it in a small garage, of course, the news gatherers wanted to know what there was “to hide.”

“As a result of that, we obviously wanted to get more! Once you tell the media, ‘No,’ and shove us out of the way, all that does is perk up our antennas,” says Smith.

His crew arrived at the accident scene while investigators were re-constructing the crash. The officers threatened to arrest them.

News people felt that the Fordice assistants and top law enforcement were providing different, less than full explanations of why the chief executive had gone to Tennessee alone.

And—the television stations received calls from anonymous viewers claiming a cover-up and demanding it be reported that Fordice was seeing a woman (a rumor), while his wife was in France. He had had an affair several years earlier with a former love in Memphis.

The rumors, the perceived discrepancies, and the police hostility fueled press doubts.

The governor’s blood alcohol level was zero, and the story at the medical center remained medical.

The public affairs team didn’t mind any extra reporter questions.

Janis Quinn says, “They’re going to try to get what they can. That’s their job. We stick strictly to the medical. That’s what we’re responsible for—anything else, we just say that we’re not the appropriate people to respond to that.”

Hospital’s credibility was helped by accessible physicians and established media relationships

The skeptical media atmosphere did not extend to the medical center.

News director Smith is very positive about the way the reporters have been treated at the hospital.

The public affairs managers appreciate that the physicians were cooperative with the media.

It’s essential to have someone on your medical team who’s willing to share information,” says Quinn. She feels it eliminates the chance a non-medical person will misspeak about the procedures and the patient’s condition. Albritton adds, “Inevitably a reporter is going to ask you about something you don’t have a clue about.”

With reporters wondering about the incident, and perceiving they weren’t getting a full explanation from the political and police representatives, the authoritative medical answers were even more significant. “They’ll go out and explain, so reporters here don’t feel ‘well, you’re holding something back because you’re not answering everything,’” says Albritton.

The physicians were well aware that their public affairs staff was very experienced in dealing with the television stations. Quinn says, “Most of them are aware of Jim’s work. They see us on television all the time

because of Jim's work. They're not going to look foolish. The constant exposure benefits us by having doctors more willing to appear."

Quinn feels the reporters were more trusting because of the many months of continuing contact between the medical center and the media.

"Jim has built a relationship with the media," says Quinn. You can't write that in a plan. If that relationship had not been established, if that relationship had not been cordial and trusting, there would not have been the respect. I think that was the basis for our success."

The University of Mississippi Medical Center
Fordice Update (11-8-96, 8:30 a.m.)

A NEWS CONFERENCE UPDATING GOVERNOR FORDICE'S CONDITION IS SET FOR NOON ON FRIDAY, NOV. 8

Jackson, Miss.—Governor Kirk Fordice remains in serious but stable condition in the surgical intensive care unit at the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

Due to swelling in his upper airway, physicians placed him back on a ventilator Thursday night around 10:30 p.m. He had been off the ventilator for 7 hours Thursday.

In a news conference earlier in the day, Dr. Keith Thomae mentioned that the Governor once again might require assistance breathing. His return to the ventilator was not completely unexpected.

Recorded updates are available and more information can be found online at umcnews.com.