

## A TRUE TALE

George Strait, an award-winning health and science reporter, has an undergraduate degree in biology from Boston University and studied biochemical genetics at Atlanta University. He says that academic work provided him with a firm footing in the scientific process and method, and a good understanding of how to interpret clinical studies. It also gave him enough command of scientific terminology so that later, when he had the opportunity to approach scientists as a journalist, he was able to speak their language. The one thing his studies did *not* provide him right out of school was a job.



George Strait

As a result, after graduation in 1969 Strait found employment driving a cab in Atlanta. Little did he know at the time that one of his “fares” would be a trip to his future. “As luck would have it, the person in my cab was going to the building where my wife worked. I stopped in to say hello to her and happened to meet someone who told me the radio station upstairs, the number one rock and roll radio station in Atlanta, was looking for a disk jockey.” Strait was introduced to the general manager who took him into the production studio for an audition. The next night he was on the air playing rock and roll records from midnight-to-six. Soon he met the news director of the corresponding television station, who put him on TV to broadcast sports. By the time Strait left Atlanta several years later, he was anchoring the evening news. Things continued to move quickly, and eventually Strait came to Washington, DC, to join ABC-TV. Searching for a way to attract viewers, the producers created a news segment called *The American Agenda* (the program is now called *A Closer Look*) and, in part because of his science background, assigned Strait several segments on health issues. The segments were so well received that ABC offered him a permanent position. In 1984, he was named the Chief Medical Reporter for *World News Tonight*. At that time, there had never been a specialized medical reporter on any network, making George Strait the first. For the next 16 years, his varied and distinguished reports and special programs on health appeared regularly on ABC’s *World News Tonight* and *Nightline*. During that time,



### Journalist Checkpoint

Can you produce under very tight deadlines?


Can you write well and fast?

Do you think you would enjoy “chasing a story,” which involves basic research as well as tracking down and interviewing the experts?

*If so, read on*

he twice received the industry's highest award, the Alfred I. duPont Award, for a groundbreaking series on women's health and a documentary on AIDS in minority communities.

Although he does not have a public health degree, George Strait is considered an important figure in health and is often referred to as "public health's ambassador-at-large." In his prior position as health reporter, he covered many health stories that he remembers well. "Some reports have been more memorable than others," says Strait. As far as sheer numbers he says he has covered more stories about the HIV/AIDS epidemic than any other. "This



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global epidemic has forced all of us to rethink our prejudices, how we deliver public health, and our roles as citizens of the world. It has been both the most gratifying and difficult story for me to cover."

In his current job as a consultant to the Kaiser Family Foundation, he continues to assess health-related and scientific information and dis-

seminate it in an effort to prevent disease, promote health awareness and achieve overall good public health.

### **Profiling the job**

Being a television health and medical correspondent is not that different from any other news job, Strait says, but it carries different responsibilities. As the expert for the media outlet, you essentially act as an information interpreter and filter. Because of his expertise and years of training, Strait was able to tell if a health study was important or not, if the information being released was new or recycled, and how significant a breakthrough it might be. "Health reporting is really a question of finding information and assessing it," he says, "It requires trying to ferret out the truth and trying to fairly present what you learn."

In general, reported health information is gathered from a number of different sources, including physicians, scientists, health departments, government health agencies and medical journals. As a correspondent, Strait spent much of his time contacting health experts to discuss the impact of major clinical trials and other findings. Although the primary source of health information

for the public is the health care community, a recent study suggested that nearly 50 percent of the American public gets their health information from the news media.<sup>1</sup> “The critical part of that study is that, at some point in time, 30 percent of those people who got their information from the news media actually acted on it.” That surprised Strait. “Most people don’t decide whom to vote for based on what one Congressional correspondent or



one White House correspondent reports, but people actually make, in some cases, life-and-death decisions based on what one health reporter has to say.”

As a result, a health reporter must be concerned with how people hear what is said. For example, if you or a loved one has breast cancer and there is a breast cancer story on the news, it is going to grab your attention. The health reporter needs to

present an accurate and balanced report and make sure it is not distorted or sensationalized. “You never know who is in your audience or how what you say will affect them. If you report on a breakthrough to treat multiple sclerosis, you have to know that someone with multiple sclerosis is going to want to hear that the treatment works.”

Strait says there are three basic requirements to being a good health reporter: curiosity, the ability to write a coherent sentence and the ability to tell a good story. If you have those, he says, you are 90 percent of the way to being an effective journalist. That there is no special training or credentialing required to be a health reporter is unfortunate, Strait believes. “Some of the most egregious errors in health reporting are made by people who have no sense of the context in which material should be delivered. Most of the weather forecasters on local television and radio channels have met the requirements of the Seal of Approval program of the American Meteorological Association. I don’t think you need to have been an elected official to cover politics, and I don’t think that you need to have been in the military to cover the Pentagon. But reporting science and health is different. I think a reporter should be required to understand the context in which the data is given.”

Strait suggests that public health students and professionals wishing to enter the field of radio and television broadcasting or newspaper reporting can do so via two major routes. Academically, he says, they should consider a master's degree in communications or journalism, which would provide them with an excellent background and hold them in good stead with any media organization. The other route, he says, is the guild method – that is, on-the-job training. “An aspiring health reporter might want to apply for an internship somewhere. I would suggest he or she contact a local communications outfit, be it newspaper, television or radio and arrange an interview with an editor or news director.”

Most recently Mr. Strait was Senior Vice President of Media Distribution for The Dr. Spock Company, an integrated Internet media company that provides parents with the latest



expert advice, information and inspiration on raising happy, healthy children. The company combines the philosophy of the pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock with up-to-date parenting information from leading authorities in parenting and children's health. “Two years ago — a lifetime in the Internet world — there were more than 1,700 health-related websites, yet there was little chance that anyone reading them could tell whether or not the information was any good.” With an increasing number of people going to the Web for their health information, Strait felt it was extremely important to provide accurate health information. In order to do that, he would need a good platform. “Dr. Spock is trusted,” Strait says. “Three generations of people have been raised with his books.” Strait was hired to evaluate the content on the Dr. Spock website. “I saw it as an opportunity to ensure that all the content was transparent, that people knew where it came from and could trust what it said. If we were successful, we would then be able to show the rest of the Internet world how to do it correctly.”

Reporting on the Internet is no different from television reporting, Strait says. The Web has an advantage, however, because there are no space constraints. You can write an article, but you can also link that article to much

of the information that exists in the world on that specific topic. Strait says a reporter's major concern is time and space — whether there is sufficient time to get the facts and sufficient space to report them. Will 30 seconds, a minute-and-a-half, two column inches or even a full page be adequate? On the Web, you may still have a deadline, but you never have a space problem.

Currently, Mr. Strait is a private consultant for the Kaiser Family Foundation, an independent national health philanthropy dedicated to providing information and analysis on health issues to policy makers, the media and the general public.

### A day in the life

Until recently, George Strait was a health and science reporter for ABC-TV in New York. While the structure of his days was fairly uniform, he says, what he saw and wrote about was anything but.

“I'd typically begin my workday at home, around 7:30am, with the delivery of *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*,” he says. “I'd read them, searching for story ideas, then get to the ABC studios around nine and read another paper.” Next he turned his attention to the medical journals. “Each day of the week a different medical journal comes out — *The New England Journal of Medicine* on Thursdays, *JAMA* on Wednesdays, and so on. I'd peruse them carefully in search of ‘the next new thing.’”

Based on what he had learned, Strait would pitch a story idea to his editor. “It could be about almost anything related to medicine and health — allergies, a new treatment for HIV, newly discovered health risks.” At 10:00am, senior network executives and editorial staff around the world dialed into a company-wide conference call to discuss the story lineup for that evening's *World News Tonight*. “As soon as my story got the green light, I went off to track it down,” says Strait.

Strait and the video crew would locate their sources, conduct interviews and videotape the story. Then Strait would sit down to write the script. When it was finished, he sent it to editors in Washington and New York for approval. Finally, he recorded the narration as the producer and the videotape operator assembled all of the pieces. By 6:30pm, he was on the air with the full segment.



*“I think the basic responsibility of a reporter is to tell as much as he or she knows about any given subject, in the time in which they have to study it. Some people get years to work on one story. Some people get minutes. You have to be able to go with what you have.”*

George Strait

“I got used to digging out the facts, scripting and reporting stories under extremely tight deadlines,” he recalls. “But some deadlines were tighter than others.” Late one August afternoon, he remembers, “my boss called to say we’d be covering a story about biological weapons and that our Pentagon guy was going to handle it, but that he wanted me to do a story about what the weapons actually do to the human body. It was 4:30pm; airtime was 6:30pm. Meanwhile, this was August, when nobody is around.”

After panicking briefly, Strait jumped in with both feet. “Somehow, I was lucky enough to find an expert who just happened to be in town, got him to the studio and interviewed him. We found some pictures and had the graphics people make up some visuals to go with the story. Somehow, we got it done and the story worked. It was two hours of pure terror, but at the same time, great fun, and incredibly satisfying when it was over.”

## >>> career at a glance

### George Strait

2001–Present	<b>Health and Media Consultant</b> Private Practice, Belmont, CA
2000–Present	<b>Member</b> Institute of Medicine Panel “Assuring the Health of the Public in the 21st Century”
2000–2001	<b>Senior Vice-President of Content and Media</b> The Dr. Spock Company, Menlo Park, CA
1999–2000	<b>Senior Counsel</b> IssueSphere, Nelson A.S., Inc., Washington, D.C.
1984–1999	<b>Chief Medical Correspondent</b> ABC News
1982–1984	<b>Special Projects Correspondent</b> ABC News
1978–1982	<b>White House Correspondent</b> ABC News
1977–1978	<b>General Assignment Correspondent</b> ABC News
1972–1976	<b>News Correspondent, Anchor</b> WPVI Philadelphia, PA
1969–1972	<b>Radio Disc Jockey, Television News, Sports and Weather Anchor</b> WQXI Atlanta, GA

1 Malone, M.E., The Boston Globe, “TV Remains Dominant Source for Americans on Medical Information”; March 12, 2002