

CHAPTER 10

Work-life imbalance

Brad Buller

Jo Chandler had been working on general rounds for about a year before she was elevated to *The Age's* Insight investigations team. As she recalls, she 'pushed for' the promotion because she saw it as 'a chance to dig deeper into stories and ... learn more about intriguing things'. Insight reporters had been at the forefront of investigative journalism¹ for several years, and the unit is thought to be the first dedicated outfit in Australia.² Since its configuration as a permanent, fulltime operation in 1973,³ it has exposed social injustice, corruption and organised crime⁴ and broken some of *The Age's* most renowned stories, such as the plight of the Minus Children, the Victorian land scandals and 'The Age Tapes'.⁵ When Chandler joined in 1990, though, she recalls Insight was experiencing 'something of a transition'.

They'd come out of those years [the 1980s] doing Painters and Dockers and *The Age* Tapes⁶ and all of that and there was a feeling that they wanted to diversify, to be doing more social equity stuff ... I remember we spent a lot of time [investigating] aged care ... Part of the interest was to kind of diversify the unit, and that it wasn't going to be just cops and robbers and filthy backroom people.

Chandler showed initiative and wrote many front-page stories during her two-year spell. In January 1992, she exposed dubious

lending practices at the ANZ Bank, which had channelled more than \$100 million on 'virtually no security' to a development company called McLean Group.⁷

'It was a big [deal],' says Chandler. 'I got the story on my own' and 'showed up some of the executives with questions they didn't want asked.'

In June 1992, Chandler, together with David Wilson, revealed that a man known as Mr Fixit had been paid by members of Victoria Police to rig court cases.⁸

'That was a very legally complicated story to tell,' she says, 'but there would be ways that you could write around' it.

Like most investigative reporters, Chandler worked long hours and became deeply committed to stories that were difficult to tell. She went to a lot of lunches and dinners and heard incredible stories from a wide range of people, including both victims and perpetrators and 'bent' and 'straight' coppers.

But Chandler says many of them couldn't be printed.⁹ In the end, she became disillusioned and frustrated. She thought, 'I'm out all night, my [family's] really cross at me, I'm being promised all this stuff. But, come morning, the papers would never turn up,' meaning the stories she worked so hard on would be held over or spiked. She'd ask herself, 'What was the point of doing all this?' Plus she was getting so sick. 'I was smoking and drinking like nothing.'

Many journalists struggled with juggling their personal and professional lives. Their work was exhausting and often incompatible with the rhythms of families. The profession attracted, or created, 'media junkies' who found it difficult to switch off after a 12- or 14-hour day. Even when they managed to extract themselves from their frenetic workplaces, they were still on duty, yelling at the television: 'Why did they lead with that story?' or 'What's that minister got to say?'

Discrimination was rife. Some women hid their pregnancies, for fear they'd be deprived of opportunities. For new mothers, the burden

of raising children often meant an immediate shift to part-time or freelance work. Facilities for child-rearing in many newsrooms were inadequate, making them almost hostile places.¹⁰ Meanwhile, many men and some women became immersed in an intoxicating culture, where working long hours was the norm.¹¹

For Matthew Franklin, working as *The Australian's* Canberra chief political correspondent and bureau chief was 'no life'. He enjoyed the role, but remembers 'it was very hard work and very long hours'. Every morning, he'd be up early reading the newspapers and listening to radio bulletins. He wouldn't leave the office until '9.30 every night'.

Tom Hyland also recalls excessive work was an issue at Australian Associated Press. He joined the agency's Melbourne bureau in 1986, and was well regarded in the organisation. Though he enjoyed his job, he worked hard and felt he neglected his family. 'I would work late every day because that's what I had to do, or so I thought.'

Later that year, Hyland was called into a meeting with his editor-in-chief, Barry Wheeler. At first, 'I thought I'd done something wrong', he recalls. 'I had a raging hangover' because the press gallery had had its Christmas party the night before. Hyland and his buddies conducted a late-night mock parliament in the chamber of the Victorian Legislative Assembly and 'misbehaved so badly' that the Opposition leader's microphone had been damaged. But instead of getting a reprimand from his editor-in-chief, Hyland was offered a promotion. 'How would you like to go to Jakarta?' asked Wheeler. Hyland remembers he was 'lost for words', because AAP already had a correspondent in Indonesia, and he'd only been there a short time. Overseas postings at AAP or other major media outlets were rare and highly sought after.¹²

That evening, as Hyland walked home from the train, he thought 'my life has just changed, my life is about to change dramatically'. Although he knew he had to consult his wife, whose career would also be affected, the opportunity was too good to pass up.