

Insight and ACTION



IS THE NEWS MEDIA A RELIABLE SOURCE FOR SHARING RESEARCH RESULTS? AND IS IT WORTH THE EFFORT TO SHARE?

KEY MESSAGES

- The news media can exert great influence on its audience, raising awareness and increasing the likelihood that research evidence will be used.
- Studies have generally found health news coverage to be too narrow in scope and lacking the details needed to make evidence-informed decisions, at the individual or systems level.
- By working with, rather than against, the realities of professional journalism, the research community can help to improve the quality of news reporting and learn better ways to share their findings with a larger community of lay readers and viewers.

Arguably, researchers who are funded from the public purse have an obligation to communicate their findings to the public. Communicating with the news media offers an avenue for reaching the public that goes beyond publishing in peer-reviewed journals and presenting at academic conferences. But choosing this route presents its own set of challenges. Many researchers have encountered an uncompromising reporter – one who privileges compelling stories and human drama over high-quality research evidence. In the same way, many journalists have encountered an uncompromising researcher – one who is rarely available or, when they are, isn't able to articulate the research in a way that is understandable to a lay audience. These encounters make for less-than-optimal conditions for relationship-building between the two groups – and yet, building relationships is paramount to improving the overall quality of health news reporting.ⁱ

Current evidence suggests health news coverage often leaves much to be desired. In an analysis of news media coverage of the benefits and risks of medications, for example, investigators found that U.S. print and television news reporting tended to over-report benefits and under-report risks, costs, and financial ties between researchers and pharmaceutical companies.ⁱⁱ A study on the quality of drug reporting by the Canadian news media found similar results.ⁱⁱⁱ Most recently, Cassels and Lexchin (2008) reported on the state of news reporting of new medical treatments as part of their work with *Media Doctor Canada*. More than half of the time, they found that reporting warranted a “not satisfactory” rating based on a number of reporting criteria that included coverage of treatment harms, costs, options, and the nature of research evidence.^{iv}

And there are other examples that, although not quite as clear-cut, have much to say about the quality of news reporting. Collins et al. (2006) found that reporting of the 2002 Canadian healthcare reform debate was, by and large, too general to lead to any real policy changes.^v And Hayes et al. (2007) found that Canadian newspapers rarely reported on socioeconomic factors, even though it's well-understood by the research community that these factors significantly shape population health outcomes.^{vi}

These findings are worth noting, given that news reporting can influence the beliefs and behaviour of its audience. A 2002 Cochrane Review assessing the effects of mass media (news media, but public health advertising) on health services use found that positive reporting of a health service or intervention (for example, immunizations and screening) was associated with a higher use of health services, while unfavourable publicity was associated with lower use.^{vii}

Perhaps the greatest barrier to improving the quality of news media coverage is that there are too few well-developed relationships between researchers and journalists. In interviews with Canadian news reporters, Waddell et al. (2005) found that the biggest obstacle to reporting on timely health research issues is the failure of researchers to understand the professional realities of journalism, coupled with a lack of ongoing relationships between journalists and researchers.ⁱ To help ensure important stories get told and to enhance quality in health reporting, researchers and journalists must work together. For journalists, this will involve sharpening their research appraisal skills.^{viii} For researchers, this will involve making themselves available when they are called upon to offer subject expertise and to respect the deadlines that shape much daily news reporting. For research to transfer well into the news, the research must also be simplified, synthesized, and, most importantly, compelling.ⁱ

References

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For Further Reading

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