



Reporting on health

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Why health coverage important

- NEWS stories abound, because HEALTH offers:
 - World's biggest industry \$5 trillion-plus turnover
 - World's biggest employer
 - Major political issue in every country
 - Local, regional, national, international, global
 - Social issue – defining national culture
 - Scientific stories – medical research, impact of treatments and diseases etc
 - Personal interests of news audiences: human interest stories; will I/grandma get treated? etc

News values and health

- ❑ Conflict of interest affecting reporters, **editors** and **news media** owners.
- ❑ **Journalists** want stories that count high in news values for their target audience
- ❑ They want **good news** on research and cures
- ❑ Happy to focus on **bad news on health systems**
- ❑ They want **simple news** (and therefore try to simplify sometimes carefully nuanced reports and findings)

Problems in health reporting

- ❑ Not part of journalists' basic training
- ❑ Surveys show most news on health reported by non-specialists
- ❑ Even most specialist health reporters largely self taught
 - ❑ AHCJ/KFF survey
 - ❑ Reuters Institute survey
 - ❑ HeaRT survey
- ❑ Health specialists no journalism training.

Obstacles to involving journalists in further training

- ❑ Thinned out newsrooms and profit-oriented employers mean few resources and no encouragement for training
- ❑ Many journalists already in post making a living as health reporters without training
- ❑ Editors also lack health journalism training, happy with existing standards
- ❑ So we need to persuade journalists, staff & freelance to give up time & spend money to participate in extra training

Why does it matter?

- News media are the only source of information for most of general public
- Few health workers will be aware of issues outside their own sphere of activity (department, service, locality, specialism)
- Media responsibility to **critique** information, put in context, popularise and explain
- Misleading info can cause panic and impact on health (MMR) + policy (swine flu)

Accuracy in medical reports

- Many stories on medical research, science and new treatments based on **press releases**
- Core research and science is often **simplified and “spun”** for headlines by PR depts
- The result can be exaggerations, negative findings suppressed, misleading statistics, etc
- Much of the research conducted by **profit-seeking** organisations: Universities seek **profile, research grants** and recruitment

Peer review not enough

- ❑ Even where science stories based on info from peer reviewed journals, problems remain
- ❑ Lancet editor **Richard Horton** has identified ten problems
- ❑ 1. Manipulation of research findings
- ❑ 2. **Bias toward positive findings** in sponsored studies
- ❑ 3. Undisclosed adverse data
- ❑ 4. Actively **hiding** negative data
- ❑ 5. **Supplement publishing:** Journal supplements often represent little more than information-laundering operations for industry.

Horton's ten points

- 6. **Undisclosed conflicts of interest:** “the continuing privatisation of much of science threatens to make independent research almost impossible to do.”
- 7. Editorial kick-backs
- 8. **Ghost-writing:** pharmaceutical companies seed the medical literature with ghostwritten editorials, reviews, and opinion pieces: a company friendly expert is then paid to have his or her name appear on the article.
- 9. **Continuing medical education:** Industry is now a major sponsor of medical "education". A former editor of the NEJM, Marcia Angell, estimates that about 60% of CME in the US is paid for by industry.
- 10. Failure to align commercial with public interests.

Reporting: the basics

- Key issues for journalists:
 - **Access** points for information
 - **Timely information** for journalists under pressure in thinned-out newsrooms
 - **Range of information** (Board papers, etc) not just occasional press releases on selected issues
 - **Transparency** – not shrouding details with “business in confidence”
 - Journos also need informed comment and analysis – need **public access** to information

Criteria to measure quality

- Gary Schwitzer/ healthnewsreview.org developed **ten point checklist** to identify strengths and weaknesses of reports on medical treatment and innovations
- In my view it is also important to scrutinise evidence and critique articles on **health policy issues**
- Recent example in England of Health & Social Care Act, poorly reported, public unaware

My ten points on policy

1. Does the story ask whether there is any concrete **plan and timescale for implementation**?
2. Does it explain **costs** & identify funding?
3. Does it question whether the policy based on ideology or addressing a **genuine problem**?
4. Does it seek **evidence of the effectiveness** of the policy and that it has been used successfully elsewhere?
5. Are the **downsides** of the policy explored?

My ten points (6-10)

6. Does the story unreasonably suggest a **consensus** in favour of the policy and **ignore opposing views**?

7. Are the claimed benefits of the policy explored and **questioned**?

8. Does the story largely stem from **official press releases** promoting the policy?

9. Are potential **conflicts of interest** explored?

10. Are **alternative policies** discussed?

Our aim: improved health journalism

- ❑ Not telling people what to **say**, but keen to ensure **CRITICAL** approach
- ❑ **Break dependence** on official handouts and press releases
- ❑ Offer **links, resources** and suggest how journalists can develop their own lists of useful contacts for **independent comment**.
- ❑ Demand **increased transparency** from health care commissioners and providers

Prioritising topics for further training: journalists' choice

- ❑ Medical Research and Science
- ❑ The business/economics of health care
- ❑ Health policy
- ❑ Health care quality and performance
- ❑ Global Health
- ❑ Consumer/Lifestyle health
- ❑ The politics of health care
- ❑ Health disparities
- ❑ The workings of publicly financed health programs

Extra skills most in demand

- ❑ How to evaluate conflicts of interest
- ❑ How to interpret medical research reports
- ❑ How to understand statistics
- ❑ How to understand hospital and other financial reports
- ❑ How to map health conditions, services and the like in my community
- ❑ How to do multimedia reporting
- ❑ How to search for medical information online
- ❑ How to work with Excel or other analytical software
- ❑ How to understand public opinion polls and surveys

Resources for learning

- ❑ Training packages varied according to expressed interest in survey
- ❑ Quite wide differences & contradictions
- ❑ Our survey showed the preference was for taught sessions backed up by online resources rather than purely online courses
- ❑ Again different countries face different preferences/time constraints: UK least favourable to 4-day course

Big gaps: how can they be filled?

- Two thirds overall (and more than half in every country) felt that the level of coverage of **Global Health** was inadequate, 80% of Romanians, 76% of British and 72% of German journalists felt there was not enough **Global Health** reporting: but only 30% of Romanians, 18% of British and 12% of Germans wanted training on **Global Health**.
- The subject that scored the highest for “too much” coverage (37%) and the lowest for “not enough” (14%) was **Consumer and Lifestyle health**.

Journos unimpressed

- EU Health journalists were strikingly unenthusiastic about the quality of specific areas of health journalism by their colleagues
- At most 39% regarded coverage of ANY of the topics as either good or excellent
- Five of eight topics scored less than 30%.
- Especially low numbers regarded reports on **The Business and Economics of Health Care**, **The Politics of Health Care** and **Health Disparities** as excellent.

What next?

- ❑ Campaign with NUJ to: survey prevalence of health specialists in newsrooms, campaign for each newsroom to have health reporter
- ❑ Develop short course options (Coventry Uni)
- ❑ E-book on health journalism
- ❑ www.europeanhealthjournalism.com
- ❑ Develop a blog sharing experience, tips and knowledge on health reporting
- ❑ Other ideas & suggestions EU/Canada/US/world!

Thankyou!

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□ www.healthemergency.org.uk

□ www.europeanhealthjournalism.com