



Media coverage of health stories often inaccurate, MDs report

Canadian physicians think journalists could be doing a better job reporting on health issues, according to a recent survey. The random poll of 250 general practitioners, conducted in May, revealed that only 34% believe the news media are delivering accurate coverage of medical health information. Despite the less-than-glowing assessment of journalists' efforts, nearly

75% of respondents said health-related news items are beneficial because patients often ask questions about them, which indicates that they are trying to learn more about their health.

Just over a quarter of the physicians polled said patients arrive at least once a day with questions based on media stories. Another 44% reported receiving such queries at least once a week.

Results of the survey, which was commissioned by the Canadian Science Writers Association (CSWA) and financed by Bayer Inc., were presented at the CSWA's annual conference in late May.

Dr. Michael Evans, an assistant professor in the University of Toronto's Department of Family and Community Medicine and staff physician with Toronto's University Health Network, said ever-increasing medical news coverage — much of it fuelled by the drug industry's "PR machine" — is a double-edged sword.

"On the one hand, we have people coming into the office asking for the latest arthritis drug when they haven't even tried Tylenol yet," says Evans, who has a special interest in health and the mass media. "On the up side, though, thanks to Viagra, we have men coming in and talking about their sexual health for the first time."

Of the physicians who reported that health stories influence patients' questions ($n = 216$), 82% said requests were based on a misunderstanding of the research or findings that were reported. Close to a third of doctors blamed this on poor media coverage, while 54% chalked it up to patients simply failing to understand the material.

Physicians reported that poor reporting of medical stories was primarily due to the media's desire to grab audience or reader attention (41%), followed by journalists' limited knowledge of the subject matter (31%) and limited time available to research and prepare stories (14%).

General practitioners gave journalists the highest marks for coverage of the results of clinical trials (32% reported such coverage was good/excellent) and the lowest marks for distinguishing clearly between incremental medical advances and those with real clinical significance (13% chose good/excellent).

Training for reporters in the basics of medical research is the key to improving the quality of news coverage, according to 88% of physicians surveyed. The CSWA is currently planning a series of seminars in an attempt to equip journalists to cover the health beat. — © Greg Basky, Saskatoon



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Bad news: 66% of GPs surveyed believe media coverage of medical science news is often inaccurate

Vinyl toys, medical devices get clean bill of health

Vinyl softeners used in medical devices and children's toys have been deemed safe by an independent, non-profit group of US researchers. The finding directly contradicts another study from an international consortium of 180 organizations, including the American Nurses Association.

The American Council on Science and Health (ACSH), which is dedicated to "helping Americans distin-

guish between real and hypothetical health risks," formed a 17-member expert panel in February to look at the safety of 2 plasticizers. Di-2ethylhexyl-phthalate (DEHP) is the primary plasticizer used in many medical devices; di-isononyl phthalate (DINP) is present in soft vinyl toys.

"Consumers can be confident that vinyl toys and medical devices are safe," stated former US surgeon general Dr.

Everett Koop, who chaired the panel. "There is no scientific evidence that they are harmful to children or adults."

However, Health Care Without Harm (HCWH), whose member organizations include Greenpeace, 41 hospitals and the American Public Health Association, commissioned another comprehensive review of the

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Pulse

Looking for an alternative

A survey conducted by the Fraser Institute revealed that 73% of Canadians had used at least one alternative therapy at some point in their life. Chiropractic was the most common therapy used, being cited by 36% of respondents, followed by relaxation techniques and massage at 23%. Prayer was cited by 21% of respondents.

Exactly half reported using at least one alternative therapy in the previous 12 months, but within this group only 44% discussed this fact with their physician. More than half of these respondents (53%) felt it was unimportant for their doctor to know and 39% thought that it was none of their doctor's business. Some (22%) thought

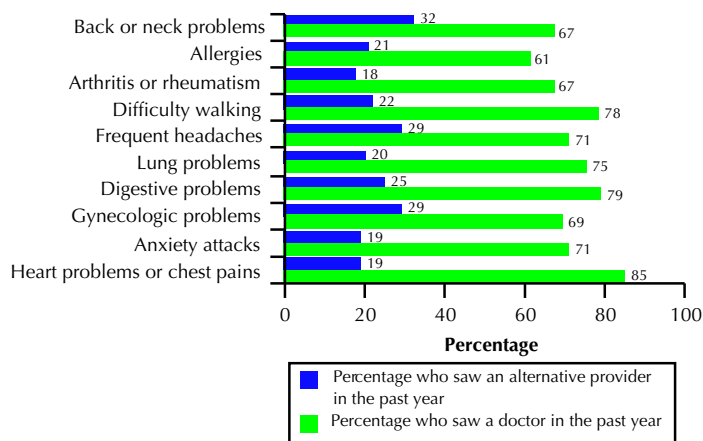
their doctors would not approve and 21% felt their physician would discourage them from seeking alternative care. Most (72%) believed that using alternative medicine in combination with conventional medicine is better than using either alone.

Canadians spend an estimated \$3.8 billion on alternative medicine every year. This includes provider fees (\$1.8 billion), books, medical equipment, herbs, vitamins and special diet programs; \$3.8 billion accounts for more than 16% of all private health care expenditures in 1995. By way of comparison, total annual capital expenditures in Canada's hospitals stood at \$2.1 billion in 1995.

Most respondents (60%) felt that alternative medicine should not be covered by provincial health plans but should remain a private expense.

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Survey of people seeing a medical doctor or other provider for conventional or alternative medical care



Source: Alternative Medicine in Canada, The Fraser Institute, 1999

Plastics debate continues

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scientific literature. That report, *The use of Di-2ethylhexyl-phthalate in PVC medical devices: exposure, toxicity and alternatives*, concluded that "humans are exposed to substantial levels of DEHP through medical devices." According to Dr. Tee Guidotti of Edmonton, founder of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment and a member of HCWH, "sick patients with lots of treatments are exposed to high levels of DEHP, and because they're sick, it may make them more susceptible to DEHP."

But Koop's group examined 86 scientific reports and its report, *A scientific evaluation of health effects of 2 plasticizers used in medical devices and toys*, concluded that DEHP in medical devices is not harmful. In fact, it "imparts a variety of important physical characteristics that are critical to the function of medical devices. Eliminating DEHP in these products could cause harm to some individuals."

Under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, DEHP is classified as "unlikely to be carcinogenic to humans," although because of limitations in the database, classification as "possibly carcinogenic to humans" may also be appropriate.

The ACSH panel found fewer scientific reports (36) concerning DINP but concluded that it is not harmful for children in the "normal use of these toys." The panel did recommend further study to document children's contact time and mouthing behaviour involving toys and other objects, and the rates of release of DINP under realistic conditions. In November 1998, Health Canada advised parents to discard teething and rattles made of PVC and asked toy manufacturers to phase out the use of DINP.

The full ACSH panel report is available at www.medscape.com, and a summary of the HCWH report is online at www.noharm.org.