



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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