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## High Quality Medical Journal Press Releases Can Help Newspapers Do A Better Job Informing Public of Important Medical News

LEBANON, N.H. (JANUARY 27, 2011) – Medical journal press releases are the most direct way that journals communicate with the news media about new research. According to a study in the British Medical Journal, press release quality appears to have an important effect on the quality of subsequent newspaper stories. With high quality press releases, key information – basic study facts, quantification of results, acknowledgment of limitations – is substantially more likely to appear in newspaper stories. Low quality press releases, those omitting such key information, may actually make newspaper stories worse than if there were no press release at all.

“The news media matter: medical reporting not only educates but also influences health beliefs and behaviors,” said Steven Woloshin and Lisa Schwartz, principal co-investigators of the study. “Our study shows that press releases are important as well.”

The investigators, co-directors of the Center for Medicine and the Media at The Dartmouth Institute of Health Policy and Clinical Practice, reviewed consecutive issues of five major medical journals that frequently receive news coverage but have different editorial practices. Two of the journals (Annals of Internal Medicine, Journal of the National Cancer Institute) include editorial notes highlighting study cautions in the studies, two do not (JAMA, British Medical Journal), and one journal in the group does not issue press releases (New England Journal of Medicine).

The authors reviewed consecutive issues of each medical journal (going backwards from January 2009) to identify 100 original research articles that generated newspaper coverage. A total of 759 newspaper stories (a median of three per journal article) were identified through searches of news article databases, Lexis Nexis and Factiva. The investigators did not examine broadcast, web and social media platforms.

All associated medical journal press releases – a total of 68 – were identified using the press release database [www.eurekaalert.org](http://www.eurekaalert.org). Two independent research assistants assessed the quality

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of journal articles, press releases, and a stratified random sample of associated newspaper stories by using a structured coding scheme for the presence of specific quality measures: basic study facts, quantification of the main result, harms and limitations. In their analyses, the authors took into account whether the quality measures were available in the associated abstract of the medical journal article.

Of the 343 newspaper stories analyzed, 71 percent reported on articles for which medical journals had issued press releases. Some 9 percent of stories quantified the main result with absolute risks when this information was not in the press release, 53 percent did so when it was in the press release, and 20 percent when no press release was issued.

Of the total analyzed, 133 stories reported on research describing beneficial interventions. Some 24 percent mentioned harms (or specifically declared no harms) when harms were not mentioned in the press release; 68 percent when mentioned in the press release; and 36 percent when no press release was issued.

Some 256 stories reported on research with important limitations. Of these, 16 percent reported any limitations when limitations were not mentioned in the press release; 48 percent when mentioned in the press release, and 21 percent if no press release was issued.

The Dartmouth Institute investigators reported several limitations of their own study. They noted that since they did not conduct a randomized trial, it is possible that other factors besides the press release accounted for newspaper story quality. For example, medical journals that issue high quality press releases might take other steps that improve subsequent newspaper coverage (but they found no evidence for this). Other limitations: only newspaper print articles were analyzed even though web-based media is gaining in impact; subjectivity is inherent in any content analysis; and the investigators could have introduced bias in their use of stratified random sampling to select newspaper stories.

“Media coverage of medical research often fails to provide the information needed for the public to understand the findings and to decide whether to believe them. Although it is easy to blame journalists for poor quality reporting, problems with coverage could begin with the journalists’ sources.”

The investigators concluded that high quality press releases are a simple way for medical journals to increase the chance of newspapers reporting key information.

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There is substantial room for improving press releases, the investigators noted. They believe medical journals should make the effort to do better and use press releases not simply to make medical news but to make news reporting better.

*Editor's Note: Please see the article <http://www.bmj.com/content/344/bmj.d8164> for additional information, including other authors, author contributions and affiliations, financial disclosures, funding and support, etc.*

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