

## Health Journalism: An Enigma?

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### ABSTRACT

Ethics, even though not legally binding, are vital to practice of both medicine and journalism. An inappropriate or incorrect reporting of a health-related event can in times be as dangerous as an incorrect therapy. Understanding the challenges of medical journalism starts with the differentiation of medical journalism into that for the healthcare professionals and then a separate segment for the general public. In most of the cases, a report is influenced by factors like need for public approval, TRP (Television rating point) or in case of scientific literature; a lack of interest in research and an ineffective peer review.

**Keywords:** *Bioethics, Medical journalism, Medical ethics, Journalism ethics, Public health, Health communication*

Oxford dictionary defines ethics as, “moral principles that govern a person’s behavior or the conducting of an activity”<sup>(1)</sup> In an era where people understand only the language of reward and punishment, instead of defining ethics as a moral code it would have fared better described as a criteria for an award or imprisonment.

Ethics, even though not legally binding, are vital and to a major extent practiced in the fields of medicine and journalism when compared to other areas.<sup>(2)</sup> People have always shown keen interest in medical and health issues which ruled the media from time immemorial. This recognition, in turn, had an impact on their health seeking behavior and awareness; the pros and cons of which are still being debated.<sup>(3)</sup> The spike in reporting health news has created a demand for writers who understand medical stories and can communicate them effectively.

### *Challenges (Figure 01)*

Medical journalism is the specific dissemination of health and medical information and related subjects through media.<sup>(4),(5)</sup> It can be one of the two, either Medical journalism for doctors and other professionals (appears in peer-reviewed journals) or Medical journalism for general public (medical coverage in general news publications). In short, the need to

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## Health Journalism: An Enigma?

understand scientific news and convey them to the general public in a simpler and jargon-free way, has fabricated a breeding ground for lot of impreciseness and hearsays. <sup>(4)</sup>

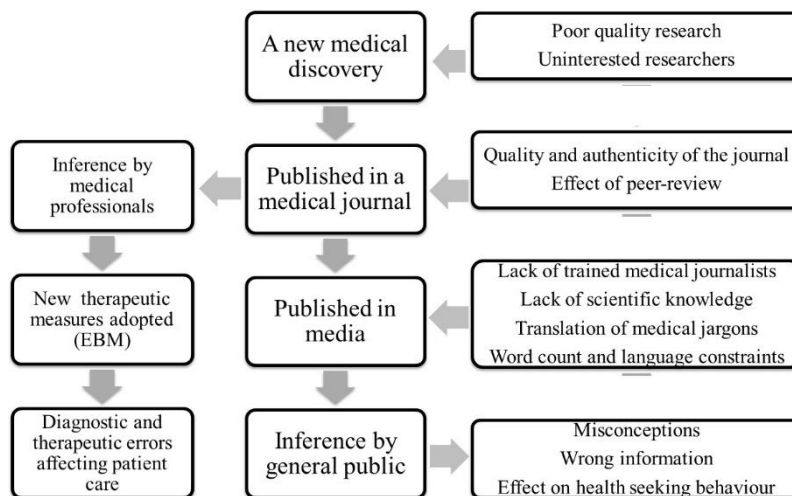
The key challenge will be the deficiency in time and lack of interest shown by the researchers. <sup>(5),(6)</sup> Only a handful of articles are being conceived out of interest while others are being written for vernal motives like academic requirements, promotions and incentives; thus making the publishing of original articles a survival instinct rather than an outcome of academic or social interest. <sup>(7)</sup> This leads to a decrease in the quality of the research and in turn questions the research as a professional activity.

An additional hurdle is the method for selection of articles by the journals. Too much scrutiny, conflict of interests and lack of a blinded peer-review are some of the factors which may adversely affect an extensive peer-review process. <sup>(8)</sup> Emphasis should be given to publications in indexed journals highlighting the role of the author, peer reviewer, editors and impact factor. With an increase in number of below average articles being printed, and increasing prevalence of predatory publishers, there lies a hidden danger for the medical practitioner, who when presented with erroneous or incomplete data may end up in a wrong diagnosis or management which may turn into a catastrophe. <sup>(9)</sup> This is a major handicap in the practice of evidence-based medicine (EBM).

Medical practitioners world-wide are inclined towards international journals rather than national ones. Being a journal with an international editorial board does not make it more authentic. In fact, it is the national journals which are more likely to print articles pertaining to their native population. <sup>(10)</sup>

Mandatory thesis works done during Postgraduate period endows hands-on training in research methodology which will be relevant to full-time researchers as well as medical practitioners who should be aware of the merits of newer management options for their patients. In this epoch of evidence-based medicine, more physician-scientists are the need of the hour. <sup>(11)</sup>

### Challenges in health journalism



**Figure 01: Summary of challenges faced in health journalism**

A recent trend in mass media is to create a "communications storm" to shift all attention to a single health issue. <sup>(12)</sup> The rising access to social media platforms also play a detrimental role in propagation of misinformation. <sup>(13)</sup> This can either give immediate attention to a

## Health Journalism: An Enigma?

serious matter in hand or give unwanted attention to a harmless issue. Over the years it is observed that although medical news articles deliver public health messages effectively, they often convey wrong or ambiguous information about health care. It is often noted that media finds it very difficult to let go of their TRPs while reporting news and as someone rightly said, “medical news is high on the headlines and tired of the truth.”<sup>(14)</sup> Televised news coverage is often noted to be associated with greater levels of worry and perceptions of the severity of and vulnerability to a particular health problem rather than the relevant knowledge, detection, or prevention efficacy.<sup>(15)</sup>

### *Impact On Society*

Medical journalism can also influence an individual's quality of health care. Due to the relative ease with which information can be obtained from the internet, many people now self-diagnose their symptoms and question doctors on new medications and treatments for their conditions.<sup>(16)</sup> This creates a situation where someone, who lacks medical knowledge, can easily be swayed when the information is presented in a biased manner. Result of which will be a hostile view of an illness or procedure that is actually relatively harmless or demand for an unwanted therapeutic measure.

It is often observed that medical journalists do not have a sufficient scientific background and have to face several obstacles in medical news coverage such as the lack of scientific knowledge, lack of expertise in reporting, difficulty in understanding medical jargons, work pressure from superiors, need for a catchy headline and space constraints for the article; giving an even more likely chance for the propagation of incorrect or inchoate information, as the true meaning is almost always lost in translation. This can result in unrealistic expectations due to reporting of radical medical procedures and experimental technology.<sup>(17)</sup> As Thomas B Macaulay said, “Half- knowledge is worse than ignorance.” We were faced with a similar situation at our Urban health center where a 30-year-old man working in a nearby IT company presented with breathlessness and demanded Vitamin D injections. We had a hard time convincing him that he needed other therapeutic measures. Later on we learnt about an article which he had read recently in a reputed newspaper on Vitamin D being helpful in asthma management.<sup>(18)</sup> The patient, lacking any medical knowledge whatsoever, was unable to comprehend the actual facts mentioned in the article.

### *Outcome*

Researching a news article is analogous to conducting an investigation. It is time consuming and requires extensive exploration. In addition to serving the public interest, certain legal aspects also need to be considered, especially regarding the confidentiality and privacy of the people they write about. Journalists are usually found to voice public opinion rather than equally representing all sides of an issue.<sup>(19)</sup> As a result, they end up concealing requisite vital information to understand the implications of the problem being dealt with. In the current era of “fake” news, it is difficult to segregate accurate health information from the “rumours”. Effective steps must be taken to control the dissemination of inappropriate or incorrect medical news. A good example of this will be the “detailed tips on how to evaluate health information on the internet” provided by the US National Institutes of Health.<sup>(20)</sup>

There is a general lack of awareness about the existence of a clan of medical journalists, mostly because they are a dying breed, especially in India where the recent trend of pompous headlines which are meant to catch the eye of the readers totally rescind the whole purpose of the news article. The University of Westminster, UK and College of Communication, Boston University, US; are two institutes offering programs related to

## Health Journalism: An Enigma?

medical journalism globally with renowned faculty.<sup>(21),(22)</sup> The James Lind Institute runs a wide array of Diploma and Advanced Diploma programs related to Scientific Writing and Medical Journalism via various online platforms which may or may not be recognized in the field.<sup>(23)</sup> Indian Science Communication Society offers a 1-year training course on science journalism which is the closest India has to a medical journalism programme.<sup>(24)</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Strengthening of the education and training of medical journalists plays an important role in the future of public health and healthcare delivery. Medical journalists should be trained in such a way that they do not just mirror the opinions of the interviewee but instead do a thorough research and present accurate knowledge to the public in a comprehensive way. Health journalism should metamorphose from being a TRP stunt to an obligation to healthcare.

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## Health Journalism: An Enigma?

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### **Conflict of Interest**

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