Re: Promoting Healthy Skepticism in the News: Helping Journalists Get It Right

It was quite a surprise to see a report of mine as the first example cited of exaggerated medical reporting in the editorial by Woloshin et al. (1). The transcript of my report is available (2). I was trained as a scientist and have been reporting on scientific and medical matters for more than 30 years, with a large body of work and many awards to show for it. I authored a book on the very subject of how a molecule becomes a drug (3), so I am more familiar than the average citizen with how the process works. I and the people I work with take allegations of hype quite seriously.

The information in my report of course did not come from thin air, but from a research article in the New England Journal of Medicine (4). It was the lead article in the July 9, 2009, issue, and the journal decided to release it early, which along with it being the lead article was a signal of the journal editors’ estimation of its importance. The lead editorial (5) in the same issue read, “Readers may be surprised by the editors’ decision to publish a small early-stage trial, but this trial not only reports important results—it also points to a new direction in the development of anti-cancer drugs.”

However, I do not see my duty as a science news reporter as simply regurgitating the conclusions of an article or the opinions of its editors. I have been paying close attention to BRCA1 and -2 (two genes that were highlighted in the New England Journal of Medicine article and my report) since Dr Mary Clare King first realized such genes exist. I never would have reported on such a small uncontrolled study, no matter how the New England Journal of Medicine featured it, if I had not heard from many other people whom I respect highly about the progress being made in larger trials that are further along. The editorialists are not naïve enough to think that all scientific results are first known the moment an embargo lifts. But they might think that is how the process is supposed to be presented to the public.

The quote cited in the editorial from Brian Williams reflects the opinion of people whose work JNCI would be honored to publish. When the larger studies of these drugs are presented at medical meetings and appear in journals, we shall see whether the enthusiasm evidenced in this report was justified.

The editorialists ask “Can we really expect journalists to do a better job than the medical journals, researchers, or their university public relations offices?” That is precisely what I have tried to do for my entire career in journalism. It is for others to decide whether I am succeeding. I respect the editorialists’ opinion on this subject, but it is not the only one.

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References


Notes

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