**Ethics in Health Journalism: A Challenging Paradigm**

**Authors:**

1. Dr Bobby Paul
2. Dr Sweety Suman Jha
3. Dr Aparajita Dasgupta
4. Dr Lina Bandyopadhyay
5. Dr Shamita Mandal

**Department(s) and institutions(s) & e-mail id:**

1. Associate Professor and Head, Dept . of Preventive and Social Medicine, All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, Kolkata

[drbobbypaul@gmail.com](mailto:drbobbypaul@gmail.com)

1. Junior Resident, Dept . of Preventive and Social Medicine, All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, Kolkata

[Swty.jha06@gmail.com](mailto:Swty.jha06@gmail.com)

1. Director-Professor, Dept . of Preventive and Social Medicine, All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, Kolkata

[draparajitadasgupta@gmail.com](mailto:draparajitadasgupta@gmail.com)

1. Public Health Specialist Grade-1,Associate Professor, Dept . of Preventive and Social Medicine, All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, Kolkata

[sulins81@gmail.com](mailto:sulins81@gmail.com)

1. Senior Medical Officer, Dept . of Preventive and Social Medicine, All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, Kolkata

[Shamita777@hotmail.com](mailto:Shamita777@hotmail.com)

Corresponding Author:

**Name:** Dr Sweety Suman Jha

**Designation:** Junior Resident, Dept . of Preventive and Social Medicine, All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, Kolkata

**Address:** Dept.of PSM, All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health,110 C.R Avenue,Kolkata-73

**Phone:**8017355170

**Email:** [swty.jha06@gmail.com](mailto:swty.jha06@gmail.com)

**Conflict of interest:** None

**Source of funding:** Self-funded by the authors

**Abstract:**

Health journalism is disseminating medical and health information and related subjects in the media. It is an important advocacy tool in global public health context. Intentional and unintentional instances of wrong or misleading health related information often curb the potential of medical news articles. Journalists who cover the medical industry face serious ethical issues as the line between news reporting and marketing often tends to blur very quickly. The matter is further complicated by the dilemma of the physician-journalists. Effective health journalism should be accurate, easy to understand, balanced, consistent, culturally relevant, and evidence-based. If there is inaccurate reporting, then it can generate false hopes or fears. Vigilant health journalism identifies responsibility as the key pacemaker. With health-literacy as the backbone, development of comprehensive ethical guidelines, pro-active roles of professional regulatory bodies and legal implications to deal with breach in ethical code of conduct may become the confluence of fact-based and ethical approach to health journalism.

**Introduction**

Health journalism – simply put, journalism evolving from within the health sector, encompassing its millennial dimensions, is the dissemination of medical and health information and related subjects in the media. The heterogeneous domains of health journalism swivels through reporting of health news,[1] medical research and its publication, health policies, programmes and their criticisms[2] involving both print and digital media. Thus, health journalism does not only contribute in influencing human health-related behavior, but also imparts huge impact over global public health scenario due to its strong advocacy framework and ready acceptability across all strata of the society.

Journalistic Ethics, the core issue of quality and responsible journalism, has explicit long term implication on societal health. Too many sources of health information leading to distorted reliability, coupled with political, economic, cultural, and security censors over communicating the health news jeopardize the principal goal of health journalism.[3] Medical news articles have the immense potential to deliver public health messages effectively, but intentional and unintentional instances of wrong or misleading health related information are numerous. This often happen partly due to the reporter’s parsimonious insight into the medical discipline and healthcare delivery; and partly due to the externalities and deviation from normative norms of the “industry” of journalism. With this background this article aims to outline the ethical issues and the challenges concerned with health journalism.

**Interpreting medical language: The challenge**

Challenges to writing health news and communicating medical findings are manifold. Competition for reporting first hand news, interpreting special terms and expressions used by medical experts, lack of competence to identify sources for reliable medical information, unwillingness/ non-availability of experts for verification of health related news, and authorities speaking in non-transparent language add up to the difficulties faced by journalists to authenticate their findings.[3]

**Dilemma of reporting news from medical industry**

Journalists who cover the medical industry face serious ethical issues as the line between news reporting and marketing tends to blur very quickly, if not handled carefully. Jacobs T. addressed three common practices where reporters and editors face potential conflicts of interest: accepting industry-sponsored awards; participating in industry-sponsored educational programs; and relying too heavily on industry-supplied sources.[4] Ethical practice of health journalism, may help to overcome these challenges by not accepting donations from the health care industry for publicity of related products and enforcing vigil among publishers to authenticate reports about new treatment, tests, procedures or products from independent agencies before media release, rather than being spoon fed by pharmaceutical agencies.

**The dilemma of Physician-Journalists**

Physician-journalists spend their working lives balancing the ethical requirements of two professions that often have competing goals. The Hippocratic Oath mandates that physicians “do no harm or injustice” to their patients and “keep secret” what they “see or hear in the lives” of their patients. The conflicts arises when physicians use their patients as subjects for stories. Using one’s own patient in a story raises the issue of exploitation even if the patient consents to be featured or interviewed.[5] Patients may fear that refusing a physician-journalist’s request will invite a denial of services or negatively affect the professional relationship.[5]

**Effective Journalism: Scientific Research vs Inaccurate Reporting**

Effective health journalism should be accurate, easy to understand, balanced in terms of sources of information, consistent, culturally, relevant, and evidence-based. It also should recognize the particular needs of its target audience.[6] In this context, the media coverage of health research published in peer-reviewed journals form the core of reliability in health journalism. In a study by **Schwartz et al. (2012)** high quality press releases issued by medical journals seemed to make the quality of associated newspaper stories better, whereas low quality press releases made them worse.[7] Any inaccurate, incomplete, and unreliable news could lead to unrealistic expectations in the public, add up to their treatment decision making dilemmas and compel policymakers to adopt inefficient or even health threatening rules and regulations.[3] If there is inaccurate reporting, then it can generate false hopes and fears. Some classical examples like reporting of incidental minor events following vaccination in an exaggerated manner may lead to failure of vaccination programme.

**Coverage of Scientific Health Information**

Sometimes false adverse reports in the media about the effects of any medication or therapy causes dramatic drop in use among public. It seems “it’s easier to scare, than unscare people”. A health journalist has to work under certain condition in that the people who supply information to the journalist should be kept anonymous; which imperatively implies the ethical discordance in unreliable and invalid information protected under a cloak of anonymity. Lack of proper review of any health and medical news by the experts and the higher authorities for authenticating the scientific accuracy of the article contribute to inaccurate information. In consonance **Wilson et al. (2009)** in their study concluded that the overall quality of medical reporting in the general media remained poor with the most striking finding being continuing very poor coverage of health news by commercial current affairs television programs.[8] Before reporting any dramatic breakthroughs, expert review should be mandated based on whether the journalist had reported in an unbiased manner the cost of the intervention, its potential harms and benefits, whether the new breakthrough have been compared with the existing alternatives and whether the journalist solely relied on press release or used independent sources.

**Responsibility is the Key**

Members of the Association of Health Care Journalists (AHCJ) believe journalists have a special responsibility in covering health and medical news.[9] Health care journalists are bound by professional standards of truth, accuracy, and context in every report.[9] To achieve this, health journalists should be vigilant in selecting sources, investigate and report possible links between sources of information and those who promote a new idea or therapy, understand the process of medical research in order to report accurately, be judicious in the use of television library or file footage, avoid vague and sensational language, quantify the magnitude of the benefit or the risk in the story etc.[9]

**Way Forward**

Ethical challenges faced by the health journalists can be overcome by promoting health literacy in their training curriculum so as to increase their degree of familiarity with health terms and expressions which will in turn endow them with necessary skills to interpret medical research in rightful manner. Judging the quality of medical evidence before reporting, learning communicative skills for fluent and digestible dissemination of technical health language would further help in generating accurate, complete and balanced media messages. Rightful interpretation of epidemiological and statistical data is also necessary in this regard. Emphasizing the importance of absolute risk reduction instead of relative risk reduction while reporting the success story of drug X or removing the tag of cause effect relationship while reporting findings of observational research are some of the examples of rightful interpretation of medical evidence.[10] National governments have to focus on developing policy capacity by incorporating health journalism and stakeholder communications across various sectors of health research. Training in health news writing is not available in a number of countries, so it seems necessary to develop and offer structured training programme to help improve the communication skills of health journalists. Development of comprehensive ethical guidelines in different domains of health journalism, pro-active roles of professional regulatory bodies and legal implications to deal with breach in ethical code of conduct are some of the initiatives that would go a long way to embark on fact-based and ethical approach to health journalism.

**References:**

1. Leask J, Hooker C, King C. Media coverage of health issues and how to work more effectively with journalists: a qualitative study. BMC Public Health [Internet]. 2010 [cited 2019 Jul 2];10(1). Available from: https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-10-535.

2. Schwitzer G. How Do US Journalists Cover Treatments, Tests, Products, and Procedures? An Evaluation of 500 Stories.PLoSMed [Internet] 2008 [cited 2019 Jul2];5(5).Availablefrom: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2689661/

3. Keshvari M, Yamani N, Adibi P, Shahnazi H. Health Journalism: Health Reporting Status and Challenges. Iran J Nurs Midwifery Res 2018;23(1):14–7.

4. Jacobs T. Medical Journalists Face Ethical Challenges [Internet]. Pac. Stand. [cited 2019 Jul 2];Available from: https://psmag.com/social-justice/medical-journalists-face-ethical-challenges-4106

5. Linden T. A Delicate Balance: Ethical Standards for Physician-Journalists. AMA J Ethics 2011;13(7):490–3.

6. Chapter One: Health Journalism | K4Health [Internet]. [cited 2019 Jul 2];Available from: https://www.k4health.org/toolkits/bangladesh-health-journalists/few-words-health-journalism

7. Schwartz L, Woloshin S, Andrews A, Stukel T. Influence of medical journal press releases on the quality of associated newspaper coverage: retrospective cohort study. BMJ [Internet]. 2012;344(jan27 1):d8164-d8164. [cited 2019 Jul 2]; Available from: https://www.bmj.com/content/344/bmj.d8164.long.

8. Wilson A, Bonevski B, Jones A, Henry D. Media Reporting of Health Interventions: Signs of Improvement, but Major Problems Persist. PLoS ONE [Internet] 2009 [cited 2019 Jul 2];4(3). Available from: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2652829/

9. A Statement of Principles for Health Care Journalists: The American Journal of Bioethics: Vol 4, No 4 [Internet]. [cited 2019 Jul 2];Available from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15265160490908086?journalCode=uajb20

10. Schwitzer G. Campaigning for a fact based approach to health journalism. Bulletin of the World Health Organization 2017;95:248-249.doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.2471/BLT.17.030417