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Media Bites: It's often what we don't say that matters

When journalists stuff up in reporting new research, sometimes it's because of a straightforward mistake. We might mix up some figures or misunderstand what we've read or been told.

Far more interesting are our errors of omission - when we report a study but don't tell our audiences crucial details about it, either because we don't realise they're important or because we don't want to "kill a good story".

Widely-read English newspapers recently covered new research suggesting a link between the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism. It's been a hot issue in Britain and previous adverse publicity has contributed to a drop in vaccination.

The reports were of a laboratory-based study investigating immune responses in children with autism. The researchers emphasised that their conclusions about possible associations between MMR, autoimmunity and autism were speculative and that more research was necessary.

But you wouldn't have got this impression from the newspapers, which ran headlines like "New evidence 'shows MMR link to autism'" and "New fear on MMR". Only one of the four reports mentioned that the observed "link" does not prove causation.

Not long after the headlines hit, researchers at the National Health Service Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, at the University of York, obtained a copy of the research. They spent some hours critically appraising the study and writing a structured description of it.

Within a few days, their conclusions - "the authors are correct in highlighting the preliminary nature of their findings and the need for further research" - were available on the internet, to help doctors and their patients make sense of the newspaper reports.

Likewise, within a few days of international front-page headlines about the recently-stopped HRT trial, the researchers had produced some sensible information to help worried women and their harassed doctors.

England's National electronic Library for Health (NeLH) established the 'Hitting the Headlines' service a few years ago, to provide a rapid, reliable analysis of the evidence behind selected news reports. It also gives links to other relevant research and sites.

Thus far, it covers only studies of treatments or tests, but there are plans to include research about health risks.

It's a shame there's no equivalent in Australia, but the UK site (http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/hth/archive.asp) is likely to be useful locally, given the global nature of news these days.

The site is aimed at health professionals and consumers, but it would be interesting to know if it has influenced the behaviour of journalists and their contacts, by promoting greater understanding of evidence and the limitations of different types of studies.

You might also expect journalists to be more careful if their mistakes might end up being so widely broadcast. And you might expect their sources - whether overly enthusiastic researchers or PR spin-doctors - to be more cautious if their claims might be subjected to such public scrutiny.

For example:

* The Times reported earlier this year that "a new scanning technique could revolutionise the diagnosis and treatment of heart disease and stroke". Buried deep within the story was mention that the study had tested the technique in only eight people. The researchers' enthusiastic comments received far greater prominence.

* When eight newspapers covered a study earlier this year showing an association between aspirin use and a reduced risk of lung cancer, little attention was given to the study's limitations. It is likely that many readers mistakenly assumed there was now proof that aspirin prevents lung cancer.

* When the Daily Mail claimed that new research showed lycopene, a substance found in tomatoes, could prevent prostate cancer and slow its progress, a few vital details were omitted. The study was so “methodologically limited” that no firm conclusions could be drawn from it. Secondly, it was actually an advertisement, as payment had been made for its “publication”.

In the time-honoured tradition of journalists, I’ve mentioned only the bad news. Thankfully, the site also shows that sometimes journalists don’t do too badly at reporting on research, especially considering the constraints we work under.