

## Conference promotion in the media: serving whose interests?

*Conference presentations are preliminary findings which should be interpreted with caution by the media, health professionals and the public*

WHEN ORGANISERS BEGAN PLANNING the XXIXth International Congress of Ophthalmology, held in Sydney earlier this year, an early consideration was how to promote media coverage of the conference, with the aim of raising public awareness of the specialty of ophthalmology and eye health more generally. A company which specialises in media relations for medical conferences was retained to work with the conference scientific program committee to develop a media strategy. As a result of the press releases issued, there were more than 520 news reports in print, broadcast and online media in Australia and overseas, including substantial stories in major media outlets.

This is not an unusual scenario. Australian journalists are often approached to run stories arising out of conferences. In Europe and North America, where there is a larger market for such stories and a more established tradition of specialist medical and scientific reporting, media management of medical and scientific conferences is even bigger business. Such media management can have advantages for

conference organisers, sponsors, participants, the media and the public:

- Conference organisers may wish to encourage media coverage as a way of promoting greater awareness of their profession or of particular health issues, and prefer to guide the media agenda so they are not left on the back foot, responding ad hoc to journalists' demands.
- Presenters may welcome media coverage to promote awareness of their work or professional interests. Corporate interests, conference funders and sponsors, and institutions such as universities, hospitals and research centres, often actively encourage such publicity. Indeed, both corporate and non-corporate interests have paid the expenses of Australian journalists to attend health and medical conferences, with the aim of promoting coverage.
- The media, driven by the community's thirst for health and medical news, finds conferences newsworthy on several grounds. Often they provide the first airing of research not yet formally published, and the timeliness of the presentation provides an additional "news hook". Also, conferences

often provide a rare opportunity to make contact with and interview leading experts from around the world.

■ Conference reports can contribute to public good, by alerting policy makers, researchers, health professionals and the general public to important new developments.

However, there can be a downside.

As recently noted, media coverage of new research often does not reflect an evidence-based assessment of its significance; for example, the media is less likely to report randomised trials, relative to observational studies.<sup>1</sup> This illustrates the priorities which drive news gathering; one of the media's main criteria for story selection, particularly in health, is whether the story is likely to interest its audiences. Study methodology is far less likely to influence story selection. As well, most journalists and news managers have not been trained in understanding the relative merits of different types of scientific evidence.

Other difficulties include the particular circumstances of conferences making it difficult for the media to scrutinise the validity of research findings or researchers' claims, and, as the results have usually not been published, difficulty in obtaining informed comments from other sources. The practical constraints of covering a conference and meeting deadlines may also encourage the media to rely on a single source.

Journalists often have to rely on what presenters say about their findings without having access to the data or other information useful in assessing such comments. They may cover conferences without actually attending the presentation itself, and so not have the benefit of comments or criticism from an informed audience. Further, the conference presentation may vary from what journalists are told in an interview.

The media may cover research findings in advance of their presentation — this adds to their newsworthiness in the media competition to be first. But it also amplifies all the problems mentioned above, as illustrated in a recent conference preview in *The Bulletin*.<sup>2</sup> The article was based on several interviews and an abstract released in advance of the conference. By the time the study findings were actually presented, they had been revised because of further analysis.

Even if conferences have a legitimate scientific objective, they may not follow a sound scientific review process. Just because a paper has been accepted for presentation does not mean it will have scientific merit, although it may still end up on the front pages of the newspapers. A recent report of media coverage of scientific meetings in the United States raised similar concerns, finding that many of the presentations covered by the media were not subsequently published in journals, raising questions about their scientific merit.<sup>3</sup> The report concluded that press coverage of scientific meetings often did not make it clear that these were preliminary findings of uncertain validity. As a consequence, patients may experience undue hope or anxiety or may seek unproved, useless or even dangerous interventions. The authors urged conference organisers to be cautious in their promotions; researchers to emphasise the limitations of their work when being interviewed; and the

media to emphasise the preliminary nature of conference presentations.

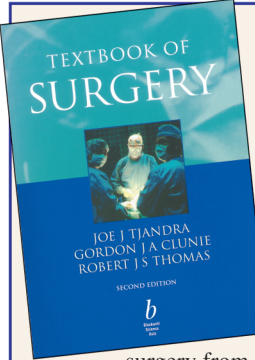
Many in the media might counter that they are not in the business of health education or promotion. But if the media's role includes providing independent, critical and balanced news coverage, journalists and news managers should be careful to apply the same standards of scrutiny to conference presentations as to other sources of news.

Finally, the media's audiences — whether the general public or health professionals — should approach news reports of conference proceedings, and indeed all sources of health and medical information, with a sensible caution.

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2. Sweet M. Wild pill hiccup. *The Bulletin* 2002; 6 August: 39.
3. Schwartz L, Woloshin S, Baczek L. Media coverage of scientific meetings: too much, too soon? *JAMA* 2002; 287: 2859-2863. □



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