

CGA/18/45 - Developing media guidelines for reporting health, illness and risk: a cancer case study

We live in an age of increasing information. Although there are many benefits to be gained from having easier access to information, media audiences also have fears about 'fake news' and the trustworthiness of the information available to them. Print, online and broadcast media are an important source of information on health and we know that the media impacts on our awareness and understanding of illness and health risk and healthy behaviours. Therefore, ensuring that we receive the best possible information is both crucial and timely.

Cancer, more than most common illnesses, receives a great deal of media attention. Yet despite many of the positive advances that have been made in treatment and improving survival, the media often focuses on 'bad news' about cancer: stories that emphasise tragedy, cancer 'battles' and painful treatments. Risk factors for cancer are rarely discussed in any depth in media coverage. Media stories about cancer have been shown to impact on public behaviour, especially around screening: focusing on the negative aspects of cancer may increase fear and discourage some people from taking part in screening or visiting their doctor. This makes it important to find ways in which health care researchers and professionals can work with the media to produce stories that are factual and informative.

We want to develop a series of 'media toolkits' that journalists can use as a guide when reporting stories about health and healthy behaviours. We want to encourage media outlets to provide more background information when they present health risks; and to use more sensitive and supportive language about the experience of ill-health. Although guidelines for cancer reporting have been produced, for example in Australia, we do not know whether these guidelines are followed or whether they make a difference to the way cancer is reported.

For our toolkits to be used we need to work in partnership with the media to agree what information should be included in the guidelines. We also need to explore the best ways to measure whether guidelines help media to provide the best information.