Medical Xpress

Study shows power of police and fire officers as injury-prevention messengers

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Nearly every night, on nearly every TV station in the country, the local newscast features news of the day's car crashes, fires and other injury-causing events.

But a new study finds that those stories often miss the boat when it comes to helping viewers understand what steps they could take to prevent injuries if the same thing happens to their own families — or to reduce their risk of having such an event at all.

The study also points to a bright spot in local TV news coverage: If a story includes an interview with a police officer or fire department official, viewers are more than twice as likely to hear prevention information that could help them and their families.

The new study, published in the May issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, is based on an exhaustive analysis of one month's worth of late-evening TV newscasts from 122 stations in the nation's top 50 television markets. It was led by an emergency medicine physician from the University of Michigan Health System, in cooperation with colleagues from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Medical College of Wisconsin.

"In the end, if police and firefighters appeared on camera, it meant more prevention messages for the public," says James Pribble, M.D., the study's lead author. "This suggests that we have a very powerful opportunity to train these public service professionals to be ready to give

interviews on the spot, often on the scene, to give the public prevention tips and information about current public policy issues in injury prevention and safety."

The study analyzed 2,795 newscasts, 1,748 of which covered a specific incident in which a person or people were injured by a motor vehicle accident, a fire, a fall, a drowning, an accidental poisoning or a recreational or sporting mishap. The vast majority – 84 percent – of the stories involved vehicle crashes or fires.

Only 245 of the stories featured an interview with public service professionals such as police officers or firefighters. But such stories were far more likely to include prevention and risk-reduction information – nearly 2.5 times more likely for stories about motor vehicle crashes, and more than 2.75 times more likely for stories about fires.

Now, Pribble and his colleagues are hoping to survey police and fire departments around the country to see how they handle inquiries from the news media, how many officers have been trained as media spokespeople, and other issues. At the same time, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention has embarked upon its own research and training efforts to help departments become more "media savvy."

Pribble and his colleagues are also preparing to analyze more TV coverage of unintentional injuries, including coverage on Spanish-language news around the country.

The studies rely on detailed analysis of thousands of hours of local news broadcasts that were recorded and compiled by University of Wisconsin Newslab, a unique facility directed by co-author Kenneth Goldstein, Ph.D., that was originally developed to study TV coverage of political campaigns.

Pribble, Goldstein and their colleagues have already used the University of Wisconsin Newslab resource to study local TV's coverage of health, and of specific issues such as stroke and kidney disease. They targeted injury and injury-prevention because of their huge public health impact and yearly toll on the American public, as well as because of the widespread news coverage of such events.

Going forward, Pribble says, it's important for police and firefighters to be ready to speak about the steps that the public can take to reduce the risk of a fire, or to increase their chances of surviving a car crash.

But it's also important for such spokespeople to be up to date on the current status of public policy issues related to injury prevention, he notes. Television reporters may be unaware of the current status, unable to find the information in time for the evening news, or reluctant to include information about policy issues in a story about a particular accident for fear of appearing to advocate a certain position on an issue, he says.

But if the police officer speaking at the scene of a car crash in which a child was injured mentions that booster seats can help protect children from injuries, and adds that the state legislature is currently deliberating a new booster-seat law for children riding in cars, that information may be used in the final story, says Pribble, a lecturer in emergency medicine at the U-M Medical School. Pribble received support for this study from the Injury Research Center at the Medical College of Wisconsin

"With the intense deadlines of daily TV news, it's hard to get the media to change how it covers certain kinds of staple stories," he says. "But if we can help the media have easy access to experts who can give useful information for the public, and information on what is being done on a policy level to make the public even safer, the end result will be the same: the public will be better informed about injury prevention."

The authors note that police officers and firefighters were not the only experts quoted in TV news stories, but they made up the lion's share of the experts who appeared. Clinical experts – including physicians and public health officials – were used in a small number of stories, as were school and government officials, and national or state safety officials.

The TV coverage predominantly focused on two of the top causes of unintentional injury – vehicle crashes and fires – but neglected others that have large impacts on the public's health, such as falls.

Source: University of Michigan

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