

New research shows room for improvement in health news

June 11 2008

Research into the news reporting of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in Australia, has revealed that much of the information the public receives through the media is inaccurate or incomplete.

University of Newcastle researchers used Media Doctor, a web-based program that monitors, rates and critiques the accuracy and completeness of health news stories in Australia, to analyse news coverage of CAM. The findings are published on June 11th in the Public Library of Science journal, PLoS ONE.

Lead researcher Dr Billie Bonevski from the University of Newcastle said despite the substantial growth in the use of CAM, very little was known about how the media reported on it.

"The research analysed more than 200 news items about CAM from broadsheet newspapers, tabloid newspapers, online news and television current affairs shows which were tracked by Media Doctor between 1 January 2004 and 1 September 2007.

"Common concerns identified about the reporting of CAM included incomplete descriptions of the research study, lack of information about side-effects and costs, and failure to obtain comment from independent sources," Dr Bonevski said.

Dr Bonevski said journalists faced a number of barriers when producing reports on CAM, including editorial pressure to produce stories quickly,

space issues, inadequate media releases from the scientific community, and a lack of good evidence on the effectiveness and safety of CAM.

"Clearer communication between scientists and journalists about this important emerging field is critical to accurate and complete news reports. Researchers can help by ensuring information released contains key facts including the type of study, what the results mean and the potential harms, costs and availability of the new medicine or procedure.

"Considering the substantial evidence of a link between health news reports and health behaviour, it is vital that the information the media provides is accurate, unbiased and complete," Dr Bonevski said.

Source: Public Library of Science

Citation: New research shows room for improvement in health news (2008, June 11) retrieved 12 September 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-06-room-health-news.html>

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