

Media health reporting: Accuracy improving but still a way to go

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New research on the reporting of medical treatments in the media shows slight improvements in accuracy but the overall quality of health reporting remains poor.

The study of more than 1,200 [health](#) news stories published by Australian [media](#) outlets is the most comprehensive investigation of the quality of medical news stories. It found that over the past four years there was only small improvement in quality of coverage of the availability of new treatments, the potential harm of interventions and [accurate analysis](#) of any benefits.

The report is published in the latest edition of the journal [PloS ONE](#) by the Public Library of Science and covers news stories evaluated by the media monitoring website www.mediadoctor.org.au

The report evaluated medical news stories against 10 criteria including: how well the story covered the benefits, harms and costs of a new treatment; whether the journalist consulted an impartial expert in the field; and whether the article relied heavily on a media release, particularly if it came from a commercial source.

Report author, University of Newcastle PhD student Amanda Wilson from the School of Medicine and Public Health, said the most striking finding was the very [poor coverage](#) of health news by commercial current affairs programs.

"Sensational coverage of unproven and improbable treatments for health issues like cellulite is regularly featured on these networks," Ms Wilson said. "But it is more serious when they start to promote unlikely remedies for more major health problems like cancer or behavioural problems in children."

The biggest improvement in accurate media coverage of medical stories was in online news services, with a five per cent increase in scores over four years.

"The media plays a very important role in communicating health breakthroughs and influencing public health behaviours," Ms Wilson said.

"While journalists generally aim to provide accurate, unbiased and complete information, they are inundated with sometimes conflicting information from companies, researchers, the government and consumers.

"It is therefore vital that researchers provide balanced and accurate information to journalists and journal editors on published studies that is designed to inform the public."

Source: Research Australia ([news](#) : [web](#))

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