

News reporting of physical activity sends socially skewed message

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A new study of television news reporting reveals the media neglect key risks of inactivity and fail to focus attention on the responsibilities of employers and government to foster greater physical activity among Australians.

Analysing the content of 91 [television news](#) and current affairs reports, the study led by UTS academic Catriona Bonfiglioli found the reports treated [physical activity](#) as soft news, rarely focused on children, and landed responsibility squarely on the individual.

Dr Bonfiglioli said that barriers to physical activity -- important factors affecting people's amount of [exercise](#) -- were mentioned in fewer than half the stories analysed and in most cases these barriers were portrayed as within the individual's control.

"To place responsibility solely on the shoulders of individuals is unfair and fails to recognise the time, cost and physical challenges facing many of us that make active living difficult," Dr Bonfiglioli said.

"People's ability to be active is affected by many government and council policies on open spaces, urban design, crime, public transport, and sporting and exercise facilities.

"The media could do more to highlight the responsibility of government, at all levels, to promote and support greater physical activity in the community. Journalists can also investigate the role employers have in

helping workers in sedentary jobs get enough physical activity to maintain good health."

Dr Bonfiglioli said the study, published in the Australian Journalism Review, was conducted in recognition of the news media's powerful role in influencing the community's view of the world, attitudes and even actions - particularly in area of health.

"The study was an opportunity to show journalists, policymakers and researchers that the whole story about physical activity and inactivity needs to be communicated to the community," she said.

"The important role of government and employers must be considered in stories. [Australians](#) have a right to know all the risks of inactivity including heart attack, diabetes, cancer and early death. None of the reports we studied mentioned the risk of cancer from inactivity."

"The public expects the media to keep them informed about health risks and benefits in an accurate and thorough way. The research community also has a role to play in clearly communicating to the media the latest research into physical activity and [inactivity](#)."

Dr Bonfiglioli said the results would be used to update her resource for journalists Reporting Obesity to cover issues in reporting physical activity.

Provided by University of Technology, Sydney

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