

Media coverage drives some misperceptions about cancer

January 28 2014, by Ryan Hurley



Credit: Daniel Lobo

People need and want recent information about cancer in order to make decisions about how they might manage their personal prevention, detection, treatment, survivorship, and end-of-life efforts. To get that information, they often turn to the news. But problems can arise when the information people get from the news doesn't reflect the real world –

and new research suggests that people's beliefs about cancer are tainted as a result.

Cancer news is a major source of information for those impacted by the disease. In an analysis of online [cancer](#) news (Hurley, Riles, & Sangalang, 2014), we found that treatment information was far and away the most popular content. This finding has been consistent across several media (e.g., newspapers, TV, online) in a number of studies, leading researchers to wonder about the impact of treatment-heavy news coverage on news consumers.

Particularly when compared to prevention coverage, which was fourth (of five) cancer stages in terms of coverage, the news environment seems to paint cancer as something to be treated after diagnosis as opposed to prevented from happening in the first place. Some have blamed the treatment-based coverage landscape for beliefs that cancer is inevitable or that everything causes cancer; a concept researchers refer to as cancer fatalism.

Though more work is required to determine the impact of treatment-heavy news coverage, progress has been made regarding the impact of distortions between news coverage and [real-world](#) cancer rate perceptions in news consumers. Our analysis also noted that online cancers are covered disproportionately compared to real-world incidence rates. In fact, several studies have now documented that [breast cancer](#) coverage in particular is drastically over-mentioned with respect to other cancers and actual incidence rates. Meanwhile, [prostate cancer](#) is chronically underrepresented in terms of coverage, even though it ranks number one in terms of incidences in the U.S.

What is the impact of news coverage trends that don't mirror real-world incidence rates?

Problematic effects appear to fall into two particular categories. First, according to a new study I co-authored – published online Jan. 21 in the *Journal of Health Communication* – people's perceptions of the most frequent cancers in reality are simply wrong and, not coincidentally, mirror coverage trends more than the actual incidence rate (Jensen, et al., 2014).

For example, in this research project we found that people perceived cancer incidences ranks as follows: breast, lung, and colon cancers with male reproductive cancers (e.g. prostate cancer) ranking seventh. Actual cancers rates show that male reproductive cancers are the most common followed by breast cancer. Another glaring inaccuracy in perception relates to blood cancer/leukemia. Blood cancers were perceived as the fourth most common cancers when in reality they rank tenth in terms of real-world incidences.

The second effect documented in our most recent study shows that funding for specific cancers mirrors perceptions and news coverage better than the actual incidences rates.

Breast cancer has led the funding race for sometime, doubling the funds received by any other specific cancer, in spite of its position as the second most prevalent cancer. Blood cancer ranks highly in funding (fifth), perceived incidence (fourth), and [news coverage](#) (fifth); however, its actual incidence rate ranks blood cancers tenth. On the other end of the spectrum, bladder cancers are among the least funded (11th), lowest in perceived incidence rank (15th), and least covered by the news (11th) in spite of bladder cancer ranking sixth in actual incidence rates.

Clearly, perceptions of cancers incidence rates are being impacted by media coverage and, furthermore, are significantly related to the amount of research funding received by specific cancers. With these two studies,

we have attempted to track and compare coverage trends, perceptual ranks, and actual incidence rates of specific cancers. [Editor's note: citations and links to both papers are included below.]

The story told by these studies is clear. First, coverage does not match actual incidence rates. Second, these incongruities impact perceptions of actual incidences rates. And finally, funding for research on specific cancers also appears to be related to media coverage and/or perceived (as opposed to actual) incidence rates.

So, what should journalists and the general public take away from this information? First, those reporting on issues of health should make a better effort to cover illnesses proportionally to their actual [incidence rates](#). It is plausible that some cancers are perceived as more "media worthy" and therefore steal coverage from less exciting cancers. I would suggest erring on the side of accuracy rather than erring on the side of entertaining or aberrant coverage about health and illness.

For consumers, make sure to be informed about the real-world statistics before making personal health, policy, or funding decisions. The popularity of any given type of cancer in the media does not necessarily mean that type of cancer is the most prevalent, nor the type of cancer most in need of research funding.

More information: Hurley, R. J., Riles, J., & Sangalang, A. (2014). "Online cancer news: Trends regarding article types, specific cancers, and the cancer continuum." *Health Communication*, 29, 41-50. [DOI: 10.1080/10410236.2012.715538](https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2012.715538)

Jensen, J. D., Lynam-Scherr, C., Brown, N., Jones, C., Christy, K., & Hurley, R. J. (2014). "Public estimates of cancer frequency: Cancer incidence perceptions mirror distorted media depictions." *Journal of Health Communication*. [DOI: 10.1080/10810730.2013.837551](https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730.2013.837551)

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