

What I learned about health from reporting it

May 21 2015, by Beth Skwarecki



Credit: Jeremy Bronson

Some people find themselves nodding along with articles like [25 Struggles Only People Addicted to Diet Coke Will Understand](#). Me, I got that same feeling from reading this Vox piece by Julia Belluz and

Sarah Kliff: [No more dieting, and 7 other things we do differently after reporting on health care.](#)

I'd like to add a few more things to the list based on my own experience writing about health. But first, the top nodding-along items on the Vox list:

Dieting (#1 on their list): Despite the fads, science hasn't consistently found any one diet to be better than others for weight loss. But here's the kicker: none of them work in the long term. Measured on a scale of years (rather than weeks or months), dieting tends to leave people heavier than when they started. You're better off eating and exercising for health, which works even if your weight doesn't budge.

Screening (#7 on their list): If you go looking for problems, you just might find ones that aren't really there. Screening tests have risks as well as benefits, and making a healthy person go through cancer treatment for a harmless "incidentaloma" is a pretty awful fate. I don't turn down every sort of test, but I do choose carefully.

New Studies (#2 on their list): Work the news cycle long enough, and things stop feeling like news. Another superfood? Yawn. Another potential new antibiotic? Put it over there with all the others that haven't worked out. I love studies that bust a long-held myth, but I almost never take the bait anymore. A single study tells us very little. Now, a Cochrane review that concludes a long-held myth is dead? That I'll pitch.

Here are a few things I've learned that weren't on the Vox list.

Trust guidelines, but only so far. The best recommendations are evidence-based, and can do a world of good. For example, new guidelines recommend more IUDs and less cervical cancer screening. But guidelines are measures meant for public health, and may not apply

to you, in particular, as an individual. Sometimes, guidelines [simply aren't based on good quality evidence](#). And [health care](#) providers may be [relying on outdated guidelines](#) even when the evidence (and newer guidelines!) prove those old [guidelines](#) wrong.

News always comes from somewhere. Just as butterflies come from caterpillars, so do health news stories come from press releases. Savvy readers and reporters know to check for Big Pharma funding a study on, say, a drug—but how many of us look for a funder or publicist on a study that reports on how [eggs make your salad healthier](#)? Well, guess what: that study was [funded by the American Egg Board](#). Plenty of studies on antioxidants in fruit are on cranberries, because Ocean Spray funds a lot of scientific research. That doesn't mean that other fruits don't have [health](#) benefits, but we hear more about cranberries than those others because the cranberry promoters fund and publicize more research. It's a type of [publication bias](#) that affects the public without most of us ever knowing.

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