

Media coverage of studies needs more independent commentary

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Media coverage of medical studies frequently includes comments from independent experts who lack expertise in the subject or who have undisclosed academic and financial conflicts of interest, according to a study in *CMAJ (Canadian Medical Association Journal)*.

"Despite recommendations that news stories about health research include comments from independent sources, only about 1 in 6 stories generated in response to clinical research published in major medical journals included such comments," writes Dr. Andrew Grey, Department of Medicine, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand, with coauthors. "These observations may be important because [media coverage](#) of [medical research](#) affects the views and behaviour of the general public, and academic and clinical communities."

Media coverage of [medical studies](#) helps raise awareness of new research, and thus influences health behaviours among physicians, other [health care providers](#), researchers and the general public. To provide context, medical journals often publish editorials or commentaries by experts in the field, and journalists are recommended to seek comments from experts other than authors of studies being reported.

However, this study by New Zealand researchers found that only 1 in 6 news stories included quotes from independent commenters and one-quarter of commenters lacked both relevant clinical and academic expertise. Among independent commenters, academic conflict of interest was present for 54% and financial conflict of interest was

present for 32%—most of these conflicts of interest were not explicitly disclosed. The conflicts of interest may affect comment on research findings, with more positive views expressed about the research when academic or financial interests aligned with the results of the research.

"It is not surprising that academic conflicts of interest were frequently present for editorialists (about 40%), but it is surprising that financial conflicts of interest were equally common and that only a minority were disclosed," write the authors. "All of the journals included in the current analysis require disclosure of financial conflicts."

They suggest that strategies to improve the quality and independence of comments in health [news stories](#), including the disclosure of conflicts of interest, should be developed and tested.

In a related commentary, Dr. Ray Moynihan, Bond University, Centre for Research in Evidence-Based Practice, Queensland, Australia, and his coauthor write, "The call to develop and evaluate strategies to include more genuinely independent and informed commenters in coverage of medical research is welcome, as part of wider efforts to make medical journalism healthier - in media new and old."

More information: *Canadian Medical Association Journal*,
www.cmaj.ca/lookup/doi/10.1503/cmaj.160538

Canadian Medical Association Journal,
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