

Study shows 'false balance' in media coverage of COVID vaccine requirement for organ transplant

January 20 2023, by Geoff McMaster



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When they launched their study, Timothy Caulfield and Marco Zenone could hardly have anticipated how the issue would capture headlines in Alberta.

And yet they decided to examine how the common COVID-19 vaccination requirement for [organ transplant recipients](#) is represented in the [popular media](#) precisely because the stakes are so high, say the two researchers with the University of Alberta's Health Law Institute.

In 2020, Annette Lewis was told by doctors that she must receive the COVID-19 vaccination to qualify for a life-saving organ transplant. She refused the vaccine and challenged the requirement in court, arguing her charter rights had been violated.

Last July an Edmonton judge dismissed Lewis' argument, ruling it was not unconstitutional for medical centers to insist on COVID vaccinations for [organ transplants](#), a decision upheld last December by Alberta's Court of Appeal.

Lewis told CTV news she believes the COVID vaccine is "experimental" and can lead to death—a position Caulfield calls misguided and dangerous.

"This isn't just about whether you put your mask on when you go to the grocery store. People are making life-and-death decisions based on misinformation," says the Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy.

Potential organ recipients "are agreeing to take someone else's organ into their bodies, to take immune suppressants and are accepting other required vaccines, but they don't want this vaccine, which is probably the most studied vaccine in human history," and demonstrated to be safe and effective, says Caulfield.

The results of the study by Caulfield and Zenone, published last month in the journal *JAMA Network Open*, show a "false balance" of opposing views in the media on the value of COVID vaccination before organ

transplantation.

That false balance contributes to "misperceptions about a consensus medical viewpoint and creates controversy where none exists," say the study's authors.

In 74 newspaper articles from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom that made reference to the vaccination requirement, 80% of them included arguments in favor, 94% against.

In the presentation of the arguments, the researchers found a consistent pattern: On the one hand were positions reflecting a consensus body of scientific evidence, presented by various health experts. The arguments focused on ensuring a safe and successful transplant free of infection, especially given the scarcity of organs.

On the other hand were views "rooted in personal beliefs or misinformation about the systemic, medical and ethical reasons for the requirement," say the authors. Those arguments—presented by candidates, their families, organ donors and in some cases a political actor or institution—were justified by personal values and beliefs such as freedom, religious rights, choice and self-principles.

"Our study found that the balance between the two positions was almost 50/50—portrayed as if these are two equally reasonable positions," says Caulfield.

"With a contentious topic like this, the media will often want to say, 'On the one hand this, and on the other that,' when it's not a fair representation of the scientific literature."

Recognizing false equivalence in parsing legitimate science is crucial, says Caulfield, because research shows it can skew public perceptions,

behaviors and policies.

The study is part of Caulfield's [ongoing campaign](#) to fight misinformation on social media and in the popular press.

More information: Marco Zenone et al, Newspaper Coverage of COVID-19 Vaccination Requirement for Organ Transplant, *JAMA Network Open* (2022). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.48800](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.48800)

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Study shows 'false balance' in media coverage of COVID vaccine requirement for organ transplant (2023, January 20) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-01-false-media-coverage-covid-vaccine.html>

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