

Analysis shows how unproven therapeutics were portrayed in the media during the early phase of COVID-19 pandemic

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A new study from researchers at Wake Forest University School of Medicine is shedding light on how scientific evidence and the

uncertainty surrounding three unproven therapeutics were portrayed by the U.S. news media during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings [appear](#) in the *JMIR Infodemiology*.

For the study, the researchers conducted an analysis of 479 reports of hydroxychloroquine, remdesivir and/or convalescent plasma in traditional and online U.S. news outlets that were published or aired between Jan. 1 and July 30, 2020. These three products were the focus of much media attention during the initial phase of the pandemic and were being investigated in registered [clinical studies](#) in the U.S.

"Journalists covering COVID-19 faced an extraordinarily challenging task of keeping the public informed in a hyper-politicized climate filled with misinformation and reliance on unsubstantiated science," said Zubin Master, Ph.D., associate professor of social sciences and [health policy](#) at Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

"This period of time was when medical specialists and the general public were anxiously scrambling to learn as much as possible about prevention and treatments because there were yet no proven therapeutics or vaccines. This makes for an ideal case study to examine how the news media portrays scientific evidence."

The research team analyzed news reports on how scientific evidence, evidence details and limitations, safety, efficacy, and sources of authority were portrayed to the public.

"We found that 67% of news reports included scientific evidence, but only 24% mentioned [scientific publications](#) or journals," said Master, the study's corresponding author.

Federal or state governments with scientific expertise were the most

frequently named sources of authority for safety and efficacy claims on remdesivir (35%), while experts such as physicians or scientists were mostly mentioned for convalescent plasma (38%).

Prominent people, such as celebrities and politicians, accounted for 79% of claims about the safety and efficacy of hydroxychloroquine.

Master also said that despite the inclusion of scientific evidence, many claims of safety and efficacy were made by non-experts, and scientific limitations were rarely mentioned in news headlines and lead paragraphs, and seldom within the body of news reports.

"When reporting science, especially during times of uncertainty and fear, it's important that we aren't presenting a skewed understanding of [scientific evidence](#)," Master said.

Master noted that journalists might often avoid discussing scientific uncertainty to prevent [negative reactions](#) from the audience, while scientists might be hesitant to express uncertainty for fear of losing interest from reporters.

According to the American Press Institute, only 40% of the public read news articles beyond headlines or lead paragraphs.

"It's crucial, especially with controversial science topics, that the evidence and uncertainty are featured more prominently," Master said.

The study authors also noted that science can be strengthened by acknowledging limitations and by portraying science as a process that is constantly changing and being corrected as additional knowledge is gained.

"With a clearer understanding of how science evolves and why public

health recommendations are susceptible to change, we might be able to build more trust and confidence during future public health emergencies."

More information: Sara Watson et al, Descriptions of Scientific Evidence and Uncertainty of Unproven COVID-19 Therapies in US News: Content Analysis Study, *JMIR Infodemiology* (2024). [DOI: 10.2196/51328](https://doi.org/10.2196/51328)

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