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Health journalists face translation challenge, researchers find

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The media constantly inform the public of new health information, but many Americans have difficulty recognizing what they should, or should not do to improve their health. University of Missouri researchers conducted a national survey and found that the majority of health journalists have not had specialized training in health reporting and face challenges in communicating new medical science developments.

Amanda Hinnant and María Len-Ríos, assistant professors in the Missouri School of Journalism, surveyed 396 newspaper and magazine journalists and completed 35 in-depth interviews to offer insight into the role of journalists in reducing the negative effects of limited health literacy. Health literacy, as defined by the American Medical Association, is 'the ability to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions and follow instructions for treatment.'

"Almost half of the journalists reported they were not familiar with the concept of health literacy, but said that their readers' ability to understand health information was very important to consider when writing health stories," Hinnant said. "Increasing knowledge of health literacy could help journalists clarify medical information to readers."

Of the journalists surveyed, only 18 percent had specialized training in health reporting and only 6.4 percent reported that a majority of their readers change health behaviors based on the information they provide. The journalists had an average of 18 years of journalism experience and

seven years experience as health journalists.

"Health journalists play an important role in helping people effectively manage their health," Len-Ríos said. "However, we found that many journalists find it difficult to explain health information to their readers, while maintaining the information's scientific credibility. They have to resist 'bogging down' the story with too much technical science data and 'dumbing down' the story with overly simplistic recommendations."

Journalists reported quoting medical experts, avoiding technical terms, and providing data and statistics, as the three most important elements to making health information understandable. However, understanding numbers is a challenge for many people, Hinnant said. According to the U.S. Department of Education 2007 report, mathematics literacy is a serious problem in the United States. Only 39 percent of U.S. students are at or above the "proficient" level in grade eight and only 23 percent, are at that level by grade 12. Mathematical knowledge is important to understand health information, Hinnant said.

"A large percentage of Americans are not health literate, which is related to significant health problems including medication errors, failing to seek treatment and an inability to understand directions about proper health behavior," Hinnant said. "The role of a health journalist includes translating medical information and acting as a liaison responsible for providing quality information. We need to actively find ways to improve health coverage and recognize the importance of the media's role in improving the public's quality of life."

According to the survey, journalists have complex views of what their readers can understand. A majority of journalists reported believing that their readers understand information from medical professionals, but are not proficient with scientific information and more prone to believe health myths. More than half of the respondents thought a majority of

their readers used information simply to gain a better understanding of health issues or used it to communicate better with health professionals. The results suggest that newspaper journalists view their roles as information providers, while magazine journalists perceive themselves more as advocates for behavioral change.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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