

Dancing with the Media – Be Careful Not to Step on Your Partner’s Toes: The Challenge of Working with the Media to Share Research Findings with the Public

Danser avec les médias – attention de ne pas fouler le pied de votre partenaire : le défi de travailler avec les médias pour partager les conclusions de recherche avec le public

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WHILE IT IS VITAL THAT HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH BE SHARED WITH decision-makers, in some instances it is equally important for this research to be shared with the population at large, because public opinion has the power to persuade those in public office who make the decisions and form policy.

This session discussed the challenges that researchers face when presenting their find-

ings to journalists. Dr. Malcolm Doupe, senior research scientist at the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP), shared examples from past experience; Richard Cloutier, journalist and host of *Richard Cloutier Reports on CJOB* – a long-standing news and talk radio station in Winnipeg – gave media perspectives; and Mary Agnes Welch, public policy reporter with the *Winnipeg Free Press* and president of the Canadian Association of Journalists, provided insights from a journalist's point of view. Jack Rach, MCHP's communications officer, chaired the panel session and provided perspectives from his role as an intermediary between researchers at MCHP and the media.

Dr. Doupe began the session with a pair of anecdotes that essentially highlighted the strengths of plain language in combination with the necessity for preparation when communicating with journalists. Mr. Cloutier and Ms. Welch agreed, indicating that most journalists' backgrounds are not based in science; they further concurred that ultimately it is a journalist's job to be able to tell a story using the research presented. In ideal situations, a communications person will also act as a translator, interpreting scientific information found in research data into language that most people will be able to grasp and understand. For the most part, this means researchers and their communications staff need to eliminate jargon and simplify statistics and numbers by explaining the issue as if it were done at a coffee shop among friends.

Fundamentally, the interaction between researchers and journalists is a form of knowledge translation. Considering the fact that most journalists lack a science background, it can be difficult for them to find news in highly statistical data. Researchers must therefore be able to answer one simple question: "So what?" One way of tackling this question is to identify how the research has the potential to affect people. Journalists look for stories about real people – those who have first-hand experience with the issue in question at hand.

Another major component of the researcher–journalist interaction is building and maintaining relationships. Mr. Cloutier suggested giving exclusives, confirming the popular conception that media outlets are always trying to get the "scoop" by publishing or broadcasting a story before anyone else. Because this scenario is not always possible, one way Mr. Rach builds relationships between MCHP and journalists is to send embargoed copies of reports in advance of their publication date. This approach allows reporters to do their homework and perform their own investigation into the issue at hand – especially considering the long timelines of some of the research at MCHP. This method also enables television and radio news outlets to plan their schedules in advance. To do this successfully, however, journalists, their editors and producers must understand the reason behind such embargos and agree not to publish or broadcast any findings from the research prematurely.

Ms. Welch suggested the power of "stories with legs" – that is, stories that last days with coverage from multiple angles. Not all stories have this capacity. Furthermore, the dynamic state of the news media means that research often takes a backseat to other headlines, including natural disasters and the latest celebrity scandals. Both Mr. Cloutier and Ms. Welch indicated that they don't mind receiving notices more than once, given their busy schedules and workloads. This is also true when researchers claim they have been misquoted or misinterpreted. The panel suggested that such miscommunications happen but most of the time they are not inten-

tional. Reporters want to be known for their accuracy, just as researchers do. So the best way to correct a story that has been broadcast or published is for the researcher or communications person to contact the journalist directly and explain what was wrong. If this approach doesn’t work, researchers can go up the ladder to the reporter’s editor or senior producer.

Although not all research is good news for everyone, journalists aren’t typically out to get researchers. At the same time, unless they are working in a commercial-free medium such as CBC Radio, part of journalists’ job is to sell the public something. The saying that “a story that bleeds, often leads” is true – but this shouldn’t deter researchers from sharing their findings, especially if the data in their research show evidence that can eventually improve the health of a population.