

Hitting the Headlines: What have we learned?

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Introduction

Health stories in newspapers can make great claims for new medical discoveries or about the effectiveness of health care interventions. Hitting the Headlines (HtH) aims to make health professionals and the public better informed about the facts behind health stories by providing a rapid and reliable analysis of the evidence behind selected UK newspaper reports.

HtH covers newspaper stories that report (or appear to be reporting) on the effectiveness of a health intervention or a diagnostic procedure that is or could be provided or advised by the UK National Health Service. The newspaper article has to contain a reference to some research in support of its story. Priority is given to 'big stories' reported in several newspapers. HtH summaries include a rapid assessment of the original research behind the news story and an evaluation of how accurately the journalists have reported the findings of the research. There is a commonly held view that newspapers are frequently inaccurate in their coverage of health research. We have investigated this perception in the context of HtH summaries produced between April 2003 and March 2005 and present the findings in this poster.

Methods

For this study, all HtH summaries written between April 2003 and March 2005 and posted on the National electronic Library for Health (www.nelh.nhs.uk) were independently assessed by two researchers. Information about the newspapers and the source of the evidence was collected. The accuracy of the newspaper reporting and the quality of the research as determined in the CRD summary, were independently assessed. The categories used were *Accurate*, having *Minor inaccuracies* unlikely to mislead the reader and *Major inaccuracies* that are likely to mislead the reader. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Principal findings

Table 1

UK Newspapers covered by Hitting the Headlines	
Daily Mail	101
The Times	89
Daily Telegraph	74
Daily Express	61
The Guardian	61
Daily Mirror	56
The Independent	52
The Sun	50
Financial Times	19
The Star	16

Between April 2003 and March 2005, a total of 167 HtH summaries were produced covering 579 newspaper articles (Table 1).

Previous research has highlighted journalists' reliance on a few key medical journals for stories. Just under half of the newspaper articles covered by HtH were based on original research published in the Lancet, New England Journal of Medicine, BMJ

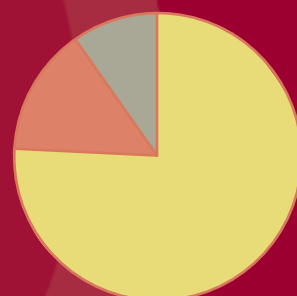
Table 2

Research sources	
Lancet	28
BMJ	20
JAMA	17
NEJM	10
Journals hit 3 times	5
Journals hit twice	8
Journals hit once	29
Conference proceedings	19
Press releases	7
Research unobtainable	6

and JAMA. Just over a third of the newspaper articles were based on original research published in a further 42 academic journals. The remaining summaries were based on press releases, conference abstracts or on research that could not be obtained (Table 2).

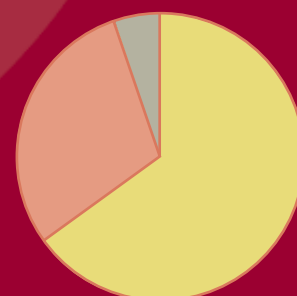
Accuracy of newspaper reporting

Accuracy of newspaper headline



Accurate	398
Minor inaccuracies	75
Major inaccuracies	51

Accuracy of newspaper article



Accurate	333
Minor inaccuracies	162
Major inaccuracies	25

CRD commentary on the quality of the research appraised

The following assessment is based on the CRD reviewer's commentary about the quality of the research appraised. Only HtH summaries where statements were made about the conduct, research methods and reliability of the research author's conclusions were included in this assessment.

Conduct of the study	80 research studies were reported as being either well conducted or reasonably well conducted 5 studies were described as being poorly reported and lacking in important information
Methodology issues	48 studies were described as being well designed or having used an appropriate method 14 studies had inherent design weaknesses 12 studies had limitations in their design 22 studies had a small sample size 9 studies were described as poorly reported 4 systematic reviews were criticised for having limited searches and not having searched for any unpublished studies In 5 systematic reviews there was no quality assessment of the included studies 1 cohort study claimed to show causation The reviewers were concerned about patient selection in 1 observational study
How reliable are the author's conclusions?	70 were considered appropriate or reliable 16 were described as 'to be viewed with caution' 26 were thought to be unreliable, inappropriate or overstated

Discussion

What we have learned from this review of HtH summaries is that while there were some inaccuracies in the details reported, the majority of newspaper articles were accurate. Only a minority of articles were considered to be potentially misleading. However, what this review has also highlighted is that journalists rarely question the quality or validity of the research evidence on which they report. Given this lack of quality assessment, HtH is a valuable tool for health professionals and the public.

Conclusion

The relationship between journalists, who are in the business of selling newspapers, and researchers, who want publicity for their work, is complex. Researchers and newspapers need to have a symbiotic relationship, for this they need to understand each other's perspective. Both need to consider carefully the impact of newspaper coverage on the general public.

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