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Health Journalism: Health Reporting Status and Challenges

Mahrokh Keshvari,[1] Niko Yamani,[2] Peyman Adibi,[3] and Hossein Shahnazi[4]

[1]*Nursing and Midwifery Care Research Center, Community Health and Gerontology Department, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran*
[2]*Medical Education Research Center, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran*
[3]*Integrative Functional Gastroenterology Research Center, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran*
[4]*Department of Health Education, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran*
Address for correspondence: *Dr. Niko Yamani, Medical Education Research Center, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran. E-mail: yamani@edc.mui.ac.ir*

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Abstract

Background:

Media play crucial role in disseminating health information. Due to the importance of accurate health news reports, and the national need to professionalism in health journalism, this study aimed to investigate the characteristics of health journalists, and health reporting status and the challenges involved.

Materials and Methods:

Using consensus sampling, this descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted on all health news reporters in Isfahan (34 journalists) in 2015–2016. Data collection was done via a researcher-made questionnaire. Content validity of the questionnaire was determined by qualitative method and based on the opinions of six experts. The test–retest reliability coefficient was 98.0. Data analysis was done by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 16 and descriptive statistics and content analysis were used for analyzing the responses to two open questions.

Results:

Among 34 journalists, 56% were women and 44% men; the majority of journalists (65%) had no specialized training on health reporting, 35% of journalists were not able to understand the health issues, and the knowledge of medical terminology in 59% of them was moderate to low. The most important required skill for reporters was the ability to interpret medical research reports (88%), 97% were eager to participate in specialized health education.

Conclusions:

Our study showed that health journalists lacked knowledge and specialized training for dissemination of health news. This has brought about serious challenges. Thus, development and implementation of training courses in close collaboration with educational department of the Ministry of Health and news programs professionals at Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting is highly recommended.

Keywords: *Challenges*, *health reporting*, *journalists*, *medical journalism*, *medical research*, *training programs*

Background

Regarding the importance of the worldwide medical research, health journalism is considered a means of sharing of the results.[1] Through the dissemination of health news,[2] medical research, and health policies,[3] mass media play a leading role in disseminating health news,[4,5] affecting the knowledge and health beliefs of the public,6 and eventually promoting public health.[7,8] The influence of media on public beliefs is so huge that sometimes people adopt a new treatment due to the latest health news they learn about through the media.[9] Moreover, media highly affects decisions of doctors, policymakers, and health professionals.[10]

Considering the touchy issue of medical findings, it is incumbent on those involved to prepare accurate, complete, and reliable news. Any inaccurate, incomplete, and unreliable news could lead to unrealistic expectations in the public and compel policymakers to adopt inefficient or even health-threatening rules and regulations.[3,11] Yet, evidence shows journalists as the key figures in producing health reports for the media often include personal speculations and interpretations and yield incorrect and misleading news reports. A study on the quality of health news in America showed between 62 and 77% of the reports had not successfully covered issues of cost, advantages, disadvantages, and the quality of health care.[12,13] Also in a study in Korea, You and Ju showed despite the fact that cancer was the top mortality factor in Korea, neither cancer nor any other known chronic disease received as much coverage as the emerging diseases.[14]

As health journalists need to be able to handle the progressively increasing amount of health system data, [15] quite a few studies have investigated the factors affecting scientific journalism, including communicating science in Canada,[16] the gap between scientists and journalists in Quebec,[17] and tacit understanding of health literacy in the University of Missouri.[18]

Veloudaki *et al*. in their study in 2014 listed the most important obstacles to reporting health news as: low willingness on the part of health authorities to render health information or to meet the press, red tape and little cooperation of health authorities, limitation of time, absence of latest statistics, problems of statistical interpretation, and lack of medical training in general.[19]

Iranian scientific journals have also experienced a significant growth. As a reflection, Iranian mass media have largely covered health issues. However, the quality of the health news covered, in terms of accuracy and correctness, is far from ideal. Ashurkhani and Majdzadeh in a research paper entitled, “Improving the quality of health news” have analyzed health journalism in Iran and compared it with that of other countries describing the quality of health news unfavorable in terms of accuracy and correctness.[20]

With regards to the importance of provision of accurate and correct health news and the necessity of employing health journalists, this study aimed to investigate the characteristics of health journalists, and health reporting status and the challenges involved.

Materials and Methods

The present descriptive, cross-sectional study, due to the small sample size, was conducted on all health journalists working for Esfahan news agencies (34 journalists) in 2015–2016 through using census sampling. Data collection tool was a researcher-made questionnaire whose content and face validity was determined by six experts and its reliability coefficient was determined 98% through test–retest. The questionnaire contained 4 questions on personal characteristics and 16 questions on professional characteristics of health journalists. Demographic questions included gender, marital status, age, and education level, and professional questions included work experience as a journalist, work experience as a health journalist, number of health news stories covered by the journalist, sources, degree of familiarity with the field of health, familiarity with health terms and expressions, skills necessary for health journalists, training, and willingness to receive field training.

In addition, to assess the journalists' experience, two other questions were also asked. These were: (1) What are the obstacles to writing health news and communicating medical findings? (2) What are the necessary skills for a health journalist?

For questions 12, 13, 14, 15, and 17, a five-point Likert scale (very much, much, to some extent, a little, and very little, respectively) was used. Scores ranged from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much). The remaining questions were close-ended (yes/no) questions. To analyze the data, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 16 and descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, SD) were applied. To analyze responses to the two open-ended questions, content analysis was used.

Ethical considerations

The participants were informed of the goals of the study and completed and signed a written informed consent. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Isfahan University of Medical Sciences (395151).

Results

Thirty-four journalists including 19 females (19%) and 15 males (44%) participated in the current study. Most (18 subjects = 53%) were married and aged between 20 and 30 (17 subjects = 50%); their mean age was 35.57 (18.20), and mostly had associate and bachelor degrees (21 subjects = 62%).

The present study showed that most journalists (65%) had work experience of less than 10 years as a journalist (82%) and as a health journalist and covered general issues of health news stories. Their most frequently used sources for the news stories were health experts via phone calls (28 = 82%) and 32.20% of the journalists said they did not comprehend health issues, and 53% marked their familiarity with health terms and expressions as less than average. Findings also showed that the most important skill necessary for the health journalists was ability to interpret medical research [Table 1].

Finally, findings showed most health journalists (65%) had received no health news report training at all and were strongly eager (97%) to receive training in reporting health news through special workshops (94.2%) [Table 2].

Analysis of the findings pertaining to the open-ended question “What are the obstacles to writing health news and communicating medical findings?” revealed the obstacles as follows: competition for reporting first-hand news, special terms and expressions used by experts, identification and application of reliable sources, authorities' and experts' unwillingness for interviews and communicating the news, absence of honesty in health authorities specially in emergencies, untimely accountability, authorities' speaking in broad generalities and using nontransparent language, medical doctors' denials, lack of reliable health statistics and information, political, economic, cultural, and security concerns over communicating health news.

Analysis of the findings pertaining to the open-ended question “What are the necessary skills for a health journalist?” yielded the following skills: skill for writing medical terms correctly and preparing a correctly written health report, ability of health issues analysis, ability to establish connections with scientific societies and associations, ability to criticize, analyze, and infer the necessary and useful information from scientific research papers, and learning communicative skills for fluent and digestible dissemination of technical health language.

Discussion

Demographic features of the journalists participating in this study were similar to those of the participants in studies in Ghana and other countries. Participants' mean age was 20–30 in both our study and the one in Ghana.[21] However, it differed from participants' mean age in European countries (30–50).[19] An explanation could be the increasing number of young university graduates in developing countries such as Iran and Ghana that has emboldened the youth to explore skilled areas of journalism such as health journalism.

Most participating journalists were females, similar to those in European countries (62.9%).[19] However, this differed from participants in Ghana where most journalists were males (62.1%).[21] It appears that Iranian women who have traditionally been more responsible for health issues in the family and have gained a new role in the society after the Revolution have chosen to follow this career.

Participants in the present study had either associate or bachelor degrees and had not received any training in writing health news reports. In a study conducted by Bauer on science journalists around the world, from among 591 journalists, 36% were university graduates and 26% had bachelor or lower degrees and had received training in scientific news writing. Also, education level for European, American, Canadian, and Asian journalists was higher than that of Latin American, the Middle Eastern, South African journalists.[22] Veloudaki *et al*. in their study on health journalists in European countries indicated that 66.5% of the journalists had not received any special training in health news reporting.[19] Regarding the fact that research suggests training in health news writing is not available in a number of countries, and Iran and other countries in the Middle East are no exceptions, it seems necessary to develop and offer training programs in health news reporting in order to help improve the communication of such news.

The present study showed the majority of the journalists had a work experience of less than 10 years. Similarly, journalists' work experience was between 5 and 10 years (37.4%).[21] Also, in a study on 586 science journalists working throughout the world, a significant number of journalists had a work experience of less than 10 years (65%).[22] A stark point in all these studies and in the present study as well is health journalism, with a mean of less than years for work experience, is a young profession.

The majority of the journalists participating in the present study spoke in broad generalities in their news reports. A mostly used information source was calling health experts. Appiah *et al*.[21] showed most health journalists (24%) in Ghana also acquired health information and news through experts. Moreover, in Europe, the mostly used sources for health news and information were through calling the experts, medical journals and publications, and friends.[19] As it was discussed before, journalists are not professionally knowledgeable enough to deal with health news properly.

The current study also showed the chief challenges that journalists face for communicating health news in Iran were similar to those in other countries. In Europe, these included low willingness on the part of health authorities to render health information or to meet the press, red tape and little cooperation of health authorities, limitation of time, absence of latest statistics, problems of statistical interpretation, and lack of medical training in general.[19] Majority of health journalists in Ghana (47.9%) mentioned work overload and time management problems and 40.7% named lack of health news writing training as obstacles of their profession.[21] Limitations of the study were the small sample size and small scope of the findings. It was conducted in Esfahan, in that the findings could not be generalized to other cities. Therefore, it is suggested that further studies be conducted in other provinces, and also in order to fully understand the journalists' experiences, quality research be applied.

Conclusion

Findings of the present study suggest that time pressure, health authorities' unwillingness to cooperate, and the vacuum of received training have created obstacles for health journalist in their mission. Therefore, considering the importance of mass media in communicating up-to-date health news and improving public awareness of the latest health findings, reliable need analysis of health journalists, implementation of meticulously well-developed training programs, and establishing higher degrees of cooperation between all the parties involved would be of prime importance.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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Figures and Tables

Table 1

Frequency of vocational features of fields investigated in the study

Variable	Scale	Frequency (%)
Medical fields covered	General medicine	17 (50)
	General information in medicine	23 (68)
	Dentistry	7 (21)
	Skin diseases	7 (21)
	Internal medicine	7 (21)
	Pharmaceutics	7 (21)
	Therapists, pharmaceutics	7 (21)
	Pathology	12 (35)
	Nursing	7 (21)
	Surgery	7 (21)
	Ophthalmology	6 (18)
	Pediatrics	7 (21)
	Gynecology and obstetrics	8 (23)
	Other medical areas	11 (32)
Required skills	Ability to do online medical information searches	28 (82)
	Ability to make multimedia reports	24 (71)
	Ability to analyze status of public health services	24 (71)
	Understanding statistics	16 (47)
	Ability to interpret research papers	30 (88)
	Ability to work with Excel and other analytical software	8 (24)
	Ability to analyze hospitals' pecuniary and other reports	12 (35)
	Ability to evaluate conflict of interests	18 (53)
	Ability to understand research studies on public	24 (71)

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Table 2

Frequency of special training in health report writing, willingness to receive training, and training mode of participants

Variable	Scale	Frequency (%)
Special training in health report writing	Yes	12 (35%)
	No	22 (65%)
Journalist's willingness to receive special training	Very much	21 (62%)
	Much	12 (35%)
	Average	0
	Low	0
	Very low	1 (3%)
Journalist's preference for training mode	Workshop	33 (94.12%)
	National conferences	10 (29%)
	E-learning programs	19 (53%)
	Textbooks and pamphlets	24 (71%)