

Medicine in the Media

The Challenge of Reporting on Medical Research

October 14-17, 2012
Bolger Center • Potomac, MD



Sunday, October 14

5:00 – 6:00 p.m.

Registration and Welcome

7:00 – 8:00 p.m.

Opening Remarks and Introductions

David M. Murray, Director, Office of Disease Prevention

8:00 – 9:30 p.m.

Saving normal: Fads, epidemics, and diagnostic inflation in psychiatry

There is an ongoing David/Goliath struggle between the small band of brothers and sisters trying to contain diagnostic inflation (and with it the consequent risks of treatment exuberance) versus a giant medical-industrial complex that spends billions of dollars promoting its extravagantly wasteful medical enterprise. Goliath is winning big and will continue to have a pretty clear field unless a free and critical press can help even the score. Dr. Frances will discuss how this is being played out with DSM 5 in psychiatry and the key corrective role already achieved by the alert and able press corps. His take-home messages apply across medical specialties: (1) don't be dazzled by experts; (2) seek hype and expose it.

Allen Frances

Monday, October 15

8:00 – 9:30 a.m.

Orientation and a big picture look at medicine in the media

This session will review the goals of the course, outline some common problems researchers see when they read stories reporting on medical research (exaggeration, overreliance on press releases, disease mongering), consider where the problems come from, and discuss ways to do better.

Steven Woloshin

9:30 – 10:30 a.m.

How big? Numbers in research

A major challenge for health journalists is to understand how big the main effect is in a given study. This session describes how health outcomes are counted and compared. The session also will provide a quick review of some basic terms used in health research and statistics.

Steven Woloshin

- 10:45 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.** **How sure? Basic research designs**
No matter how big the numbers are, you still need to decide whether to believe them or not. Perhaps the most basic question to ask is whether the numbers came from a true experiment. This session focuses on the basic distinction between randomized trials and observational studies.
Lisa Schwartz
- 2:00 – 3:30 p.m.** **Using what you learned 1: Problems with numbers and some solutions**
Understanding the numbers is one thing, but communicating them to your readers is another. This example-based, interactive session will highlight how numbers can be misleading (or just confusing) and offer practical guidance on how to report them clearly.
Steven Woloshin
- 3:45 – 5:00 p.m.** **Session Title – To be determined**
Natasha Singer
- 5:15 – 6:15 p.m.** **Optional Review and Discussion Session**
- 7:30 – 9:30 p.m.** **One shoulder, ten countries**
T.R. Reid rounds up our first day by discussing the ups and downs (many downs) of the global reporting that spawned his book, *The Healing of America: A Global Quest for Better, Cheaper, and Fairer Health Care*, and two related documentaries for PBS's *Frontline*.
T.R. Reid

Tuesday, October 16

- 8:00 – 8:45 a.m.** **HealthNewsReview.org: Learning from this growing database**
Over the past 6+ years, HealthNewsReview.org has become a leading resource for journalists trying to improve their analytical skills. Publisher Gary Schwitzer will report on the trends observed—and what can be learned from them—after reviewing 1,800 stories by leading news organizations.
Gary Schwitzer
- 8:45 – 9:45 a.m.** **How sure? The limited role of statistics**
P values and 95% confidence intervals can be intimidating, but these are the basic measures that researchers use to express the role of chance and the precision of their findings. Being comfortable with these statistics can help journalists judge for themselves the value of study findings. In this session, these concepts will be explained clearly and concisely.
Steven Woloshin

9:45 – 11:00 a.m.

Using what you learned 2: Highlighting cautions about observational studies

Because some exposures are harmful, much research cannot involve randomized trials and must rely on observational studies. A major problem with these studies is that they may be difficult or downright impossible to interpret correctly. This session will address the problem of confounding and how researchers typically deal with it. The session will wrap up with an experienced journalist's take on how to report on observational studies.

Lisa Schwartz and Scott Hensley

11:15 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Using what you learned 3: What do the results mean?

Even with randomized trials, you need to understand basic study facts: what was measured, who participated in the study, and for how long. This session focuses on scores, surrogate and composite outcomes, and how to distinguish between clinical importance and statistical significance.

Lisa Schwartz and Steven Woloshin

1:45 – 2:45 p.m.

Not just a single study in isolation: The systematic review

Placing evidence in context, determining its quality, and identifying experts who know the evidence are key ways that a good systematic review can help journalists. The session will focus on how to find a good systematic review, how to tell if a review is systematic enough and reliable, and how to interpret the results.

Hilda Bastian

3:00 – 4:15 p.m.

Busting through the broadcast blues

Broadcast reporters face special challenges because of the format and time limits of their medium. It's clear that CBS News has made special efforts to deliver evidence-based reporting. You'll meet one of the team's producers and hear some of her examples of challenges and successes—even within the constraints of TV news.

Gary Schwitzer and Heather Won Tesoriero

4:30 – 5:00 p.m.

Challenges of writing and blogging for the web

How do you take complex medical material and communicate the findings online in a clear, compelling way? The web offers tools to help, such as hyperlinks, but there are pitfalls, too. Smartphones, tablets, and computers make it easier than ever for people to find your story—and to click away before finishing it. This session will address how to write with an online audience in mind.

Scott Hensley

7:30 – 9:30 p.m.

Inside the kitchen with medical journal editors

In this panel discussion, high-level editors from three major medical journals will talk about how studies are selected for publication and how the journals reach out to the media. This will be an opportunity for the journal editors and journalists to talk about the challenges in reporting on medical research: what does and does not work well, and how to do better.

Moderator: *Scott Hensley*

Trish Groves, British Medical Journal

Phil Fontanarosa, Journal of the American Medical Association

Barry Kramer, Journal of the National Cancer Institute

Wednesday, October 17

8:00 – 10:30 a.m.

The logic of cancer screening

Early detection is the best protection, right? Prepare to have fundamental beliefs questioned. In this session, you'll learn to distinguish between strength of opinion and strength of evidence when it comes to cancer screening tests—perhaps one of the most misunderstood and hyped areas of medicine.

Barry Kramer

10:45 a.m. – Noon

Garbage! When the news may not be fit to print

The cautions about some study designs are formidable—so much so that journalists might reconsider covering them at all. This session will highlight stories that might have been best left on the cutting-room floor—for example, preliminary results (e.g., scientific meetings, animal studies) and uncontrolled studies.

Steven Woloshin and Lisa Schwartz

12:45 – 1:45 p.m.

Guidance on guidelines: Using clinical recommendations in reporting

When covering a newly available screening test or treatment, it can be helpful to provide current clinical guidelines for context, but that may be easier said than done. Multiple organizations (professional medical societies, advocacy groups, government, and others) often produce conflicting recommendations. So what makes a guideline trustworthy and why? Using a case study to guide the discussion, this talk will provide simple tools to help evaluate the quality of a given guideline and how to sort through the disagreement.

Virginia Moyer

1:45 – 3:00 p.m.

Using what you learned 4: You make the call!

Wrap up the course with some fast-paced practice in detecting statements that are exaggerated, overstated, or misleading.

Barry Kramer, Steven Woloshin, and Lisa Schwartz

Farewell!