Reviewer's report

Title: External Influences and Priority-Setting for Anti-Cancer Agents: A Case Study of Media Coverage in Adjuvant Trastuzumab for Breast Cancer

Version: 1 Date: 15 April 2007

Reviewer: Daniela Friedman

Reviewer's report:

General:
This is an interesting manuscript that describes external factors – mainly media coverage – that may influence funding of anti-cancer agents with evidence of clinical benefits. The authors conducted a search of Canadian print and broadcast media for trastuzumab, a new breast cancer drug, and 17 additional anti-cancer drugs in 2005. While the authors suggest an interaction of four major external factors influencing funding of cancer drugs – patient groups, media, politicians, and industry, they concentrate mainly on mass media influences. While the focus is on a new drug to treat breast cancer, authors compare its media coverage and funding time to 17 other cancer drugs. It will be important in the revised manuscript to clarify how and why these additional drugs were selected and to explain in further detail mass media effects on public health funding and health behaviors for which there is plenty of literature. Please refer to the specific comments and recommendations below.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached):

(1) Prior to publication, it will be important for authors to expand the Introduction especially with regard to media coverage of health. For example, it will be helpful to include literature on media agenda setting and media effects on health decisions / policy.

(2) The authors divide the Results section (page 7-8) into 2 sections: Time to Funding and Media Coverage. It seems that Time to Funding information describes additional background information while the crux of the research is association between media coverage and funding time. If funding time is indeed an independent aim of the study, authors should clearly present this as a research question.

(3) In the Results section (page 7-8), authors only present correlation data. They write: “As shown in Figure 2 there was considerably less media attention for other drugs and indications.” Were these differences significant? The few additional statistics presented on page 8 were not significant. It would be helpful if authors explained these findings in more depth within the Discussion section.

(4) The authors write in the Results section that drugs for both lung and prostate cancer received less media attention than the new breast cancer drug. In the Discussion section, however, the authors only address differences in coverage between lung and breast cancer. Please consult additional literature by Hoffman-Goetz, MacDonald, Friedman, and/or Clarke for media coverage by cancer type.

(5) In the final sentence of the Discussion section (page 12), authors write: “… we must recognize and limit the potential impact of external factors on decision-making and ensure that all new and effective anti-cancer agents are evaluated promptly and in a transparent manner.” Is it that we need to ‘limit’ the impact of external factors? Often media coverage positively impacts health behaviors (e.g., politician’s cancer diagnosis could lead to increased screening rates). Moreover, other than media coverage, authors do not explicitly address the other three external factors mentioned. The paper would definitely be more focused if only on media influences.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct):

(1) How did authors select the major Ontario newspapers with populations >250,000. Random selection? All newspapers? Did they consult Bowden’s Media or other source for this information? If so, please provide rationale for inclusion (page 6). Also, were their differences in coverage by type of media? Please describe in more detail.

(2) The authors mentioned on page 6 that they used non-parametric Mann Whitney U which is a rank test. Is this the only non-parametric test used? Did they consider using Chi-square tests (e.g., media channel vs. cancer type covered, etc.)?

(3) Check spelling on page 9, second paragraph.
Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore):
(1) In-text citation and reference of the Drug Quality and Therapeutics Committee –Cancer Care Ontario sub-committee (DQTC-CCO) should be included (page 5).
(2) It would be helpful for readers if authors included the website URL to the library database they used for their media search (page 6).

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.