Author’s response to reviews

Title: The reporting of theoretical health risks by the media: Canadian newspaper reporting of potential blood transmission of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease

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PDF covering letter
Response to Reviewers Comments

We would like to thank the reviewers for their comments regarding our manuscript entitled “The reporting of theoretical risk by the media: Canadian newspaper reporting of potential blood transmission of Creutzfeldt-jakob disease”. We found the reviewers comments to be helpful and we appreciate the time and effort they put into the review process. We believe the manuscript has been enhanced because of these efforts.

We outline our responses to the reviewers’ specific comments below:

Reviewer L Sjoberg

1. We believe we have addressed some mechanisms by which journalists can overcome the obstacle mentioned by this reviewer (i.e. lacking time and competence to read and understand original research articles). These include developing a closer working relationship with academics, training in evidence-based concepts and the press releasing of articles by journals. We recognize that even with these strategies there will still be significant challenges to accurate, appropriate reporting. Nevertheless they would be a step in the right direction.

   We have added a sentence to the conclusion specifically referring to the challenges reporters face.

Reviewer I Oransky

Background/The Media, Risk, Communication

2. Our intention in this section was to provide a brief overview of this topic. With respect to the issue of whether the media should inform or educate. Our goal was to specifically examine the role of the media in the policy process. We have examined several models that have examined the policy process (Sabatier PA. The need for better theories. Chapter 1 in Theories of the Policy Process, Sabatier PA (ed), San Francisco: Westview Press, 1993, pps 3-13.) and the model which most explicitly examines the role of information purveyors such as the media is the model which we have referenced.

Methods

3. We have included data on the circulation of the papers in the text of the methods section. All of the newspapers were the highest circulating papers in their city in 2002 with the exception of the Montreal Gazette, which was the highest circulating English paper in Montreal. We have commented on this in the methods section
4. We have included some data from a 1998 survey on the percentage of Canadians who obtain their news from newspapers as well as the percentage who would like the media to cover more health related issues. This poll may be out of date at present but it would have been relevant for the time period in which the newspaper articles we reviewed were published.

Methods/ Interviews with Journalists

5. We didn’t specifically ask whether journalists had any training in risk assessment. We had limited our questions to whether they had any medical training.

Tables (all) and Results/Risk Communication

6. The question of duplicate publications was a challenging one to address because often sections of a story would be identical while the remainder of the story would be different. Given that our goal was to see how widely risk was communicated even if several newspapers repeated an identical story, it would still be worth counting because it would have a broader impact. Thus we chose to keep stories that had content in common with other stories.

Discussion

7. The Director of the Canadian Red Cross chose not to be interviewed for this study so we were not able to answer this questions specifically and would be hesitant to speculate on what his actions would have been in the absence of the newspaper report.

Conclusions

8. We have added a comment in the conclusion on the limitations of press releases.