Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 19 November 2003

Reviewer: Ivan Oransky

Reviewer's report:

General

This is a solid analysis of an important issue. There is a good theoretical model (the media as a key disseminator of public information), and a good set of data upon which to test this model.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

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

P. 6: needs period in line 10 after "risk."

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

Background/The Media, Risk, Communication...

I'd like to see a few other models mentioned here, since it is controversial whether the media should inform or educate. There is a crucial difference that is often lost on public health professionals.

Methods:

I would like to know more about the circulations of the papers selected, compared to other papers in their regions. This might affect the impact of stories in each.

I would also like to know if there are any surveys of the percentage of Canadians who obtain their news from newspapers, as opposed to other sources such as radio, TV, and the Internet. In the case of the Internet, there might be some overlap because many print publications offer their stories online. This might also affect the impact of print vs. other media.

Methods/Interviews with Journalists:

I would like to know if journalists were asked whether they had any training in risk assessment, what they felt their understanding of same was, and whether they would welcome additional training (in addition to the comment on page 13).

Tables (all) and Results/Risk Communication:

I would like to know how many, if any, of the stories were duplicates. You mention the Canadian Press Service, which I assume is carried by multiple papers, and a story published by 4 of 6 papers
reporting a statement by Dr. Kobrinsky. In many similar studies, duplicate stories are discounted, or at least noted. This could have an important impact on your analysis in "Risk Communication" of the numbers of stories that referred to various evidence/etc.

Discussion:

I would like to see a brief discussion of whether the director of the Canadian Red Cross Society made any comments on what the agency would have done if the patient's daughter had not called the blood donation center. If the Red Cross had heard about Dr. Kobrinsky's comments without media attention, would it have acted? Did it in fact hear about the comments before the patient's daughter called?

Conclusions:

The suggestion that press releases from journals can improve the uptake of research by the lay press should be tempered with a phrase remarking on the potential and real problems of such press releases, which are often selective in their presentation of data.

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

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No

**Declaration of competing interests:**

None.