

Most Media Coverage of Drugs Highly Biased

A study of how the mainstream mass media covers health found that many news stories on drugs fail to report side effects or researchers' financial ties to the companies that make the medications. The researchers looked at 207 newspaper and TV stories from 1994 to 1998 on three drugs: aspirin; Zocor, a cholesterol-lowering drug; and Fosamax, an osteoporosis drug.

In the 170 stories that cited experts or scientific studies, half included at least one expert or study with financial ties to the drug's manufacturer. Of those, only 40 percent reported the potential conflict of interest. The study also found that fewer than half the news stories reported the drugs' side effects and only 30 percent noted their cost.

This report was published in the New England Journal of Medicine, whose incoming editor has been charged by the FDA for an apparent conflict of interest involving a drug company. He has admitted that he may have made a mistake last year when he praised a new asthma drug made by a company that had hired him to evaluate studies about the medication.

Additionally, forty percent of the stories studied did not report the numbers behind the claims of medical benefits. Also, 83 percent of the studies reported only the relative benefit, 2 percent reported only the absolute benefit, and only 15 percent reported both.

For example, many 1996 stories about a Fosamax study said the drug would cut an osteoporosis patient's risk of a broken hip in half - the relative benefit. But most failed to include the absolute reduction in risk, from a 2 percent chance of a hip fracture to 1 percent.

Reporting only the relative benefit is an approach that has been shown to increase the enthusiasm of doctors and patients for long-term preventive treatments and that could be viewed as potentially misleading. In addition, while most of the top medical journals require researchers to report their financial ties to drug companies, some studies do not include the information because a researcher fails to disclose it.

[New England Journal of Medicine](#) 2000; 342: 1668-1671.

COMMENT: Here we have it again. NEJM comes up with two winner articles documenting the incredible influence that the drug companies have on the media. With their new editor coming in my guess is that we will not see these types of articles published again in the near future.

Fortunately, you don't have to be fooled. That is the purpose of this newsletter, to give you the truth behind the health news you see on TV or read in the paper or periodicals. I have access to the same wire feeds that the news media does, but no drug company is funding me to influence what I have to say. If you feel that this service is helpful and would like to help your friends and relatives receive the truth behind the headlines you can encourage them to subscribe to the newsletter by clicking on the button below. My goal is to have this news reach as many people as possible. If a significant mass of people understand the truth we will be able to change the way health care is done in this country. I believe the goal is achievable as the Internet levels the playing field. It will happen eventually, but you can facilitate that process by helping to spread the word.