

Medical reporting in the lay press

My first up-close and personal experience with the “press” happened about 6 months after I started private practice in Richmond. The incident started innocently enough with a person who identified himself as a journalist who just happened to be doing an article on doctors and needed a photograph of a doctor carrying a medical bag. I was standing in my office parking lot at the time holding my medical bag and being the helping professional I am, I volunteered as long as he didn’t shoot my face. He agreed, but while taking the five or six shots he stated that he just wanted to take one face on for my own photo album. Thinking only of how impressed my difficult-to-impress wife would be, I smiled the best testosterone-soaked, mustachioed grin that I could muster. About a month later I saw my foolishly grinning visage prominently displayed on the main bulletin board of the hospital, on the door of my office, and stuck under one of the windshield wipers on my car. Over the next year the picture found its way into the *Vancouver Sun* on several occasions, as well as, at one point, in the *BC Medical Journal* because the photo was used in an ad for pagers. I was angry and embarrassed and contacted the photojournalist intent on making his life a living hell. When I stopped to take a breath, he reminded me that I had signed a little piece of paper that allowed him to do whatever he wanted with the picture, and he hung up (he never did send me one for my photo album).

At the time I considered the journalist to be guilty of fraudulent misrepresentation, but more likely he just saw an opportunity and took it without a second thought. I can now understand that he wasn’t acting irresponsibly; he was just trying to make a buck. However, physicians are periodically affected by what is extremely irresponsible reporting in a vast array of

lay publications. The most recent example was an article in one of our local newspapers alerting all their readers that a new test for detecting cervical cancer, called HPV-DNA, was available and that it was significantly more sensitive than a Pap smear. In fact, the reporter suggested that approximately 50% of cervical cancers are missed by Pap smears and suggested that all women should demand an HPV-DNA test if they really wanted to be safe in their screening decision-making regarding cervical cancer. The next few weeks saw a barrage of questions and demands about and for this test in many unprepared doctors’ offices around the province. Most docs hadn’t even heard of this test and found themselves feeling very uncomfortable discussing a topic they had no knowledge of.

It turns out that HPV-DNA testing is unavailable here. However, there is a pilot project underway through the BC Cancer Agency, but the finding and clinical recommendations won’t be available for quite a while yet (the *BCMJ* hopes to publish a BCCA interim report on this topic soon). Apparently however, at this point in the project it looks like the test might be useful in identifying women at higher risk for cervical cancer if they are positive for HPV-DNA, indicating that they have been exposed to the virus. At the end of the study it looks like this test is very unlikely to replace the tried-and-true Pap smear, which remains a very effective, very inexpensive large-population screening tool (the 50% quote in the article is spurious).

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Our local reporter published information that likely originated from US lay publications almost certainly without checking to see what the Canadian experience and recommendations are. He or she recanted an amazing amount of angst in our patient population and an equal amount of professional discomfort in all of us caught broadside once again by a poorly researched piece of pseudoscientific journalism.

There are very good medical science journalists out there—I've met some of them. However, as always it's that small cohort of their colleagues who are too lazy to confirm their facts before sending it to print that really drive all of us crazy.

I don't know how the rest of you deal with the office chaos that results from irresponsible reporting in the lay press. However, there is a free BCMA e-mail service that you can use daily so you have a heads-up before the ball comes flying your way 20 seconds after walking through the front door of your office (it's called the News-Flash; e-mail vlee@bcma.bc.ca to be put on the distribution list).

Like all good boy scouts and girl scouts, it never hurts to be prepared.

—JAW

A world worth living in

17 December 2007

Canada and the United States have accepted the UN-sponsored Bali road map on global warming—finally.

There is no question that climate changes cyclically between warming and cooling. However, I do not think that any reasonable person would argue that greenhouse gases are not accelerating global warming to the point where huge ecosystems are changing dramatically with effects that are terrifying and terrifyingly unknown. The melting of the polar ice caps and the melting of permafrost are troubling examples.

There is also no question that it is a complex issue and that “emerging” countries like China and India drove a hard bargain for concessions but, let's face it, China is fast running out of water and the Asian subcontinent is facing famine from floods and rice shortages.

We North Americans have the biggest carbon footprint and it seems to me that if we have to cut back so that we can compensate South American Indians for not cutting down the rain forest or help developing nations (hardest hit by global warming) develop green technology, then so be it.

Despite the obvious importance of global warming, and our contributions to it, we seem to be reluctant, behind the front lines, followers rather than bold leaders.

We need to question every one of our politicians to try to address this problem as aggressively as possible so that our grandchildren have a world worth living in. We have to impress on them that this is not only the right thing to do but it is suicide if we don't.

—AJS

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