

Promoting better quality media coverage of cancer

Kathy Redmond

The media has a crucial role in shaping public attitudes towards cancer. Media coverage of cancer can convey important messages to the general public that the disease is not always a death sentence, early diagnosis saves lives, access to optimum treatment improves outcomes, and that life does not stop because you have cancer. High-quality coverage of cancer can also raise awareness about ways of bridging gaps and addressing inequities, as well as portraying people's experience of the disease in a more realistic light.

Unfortunately, the media coverage of cancer is quite frequently of poor quality. This type of reporting can reinforce the myth that cancer is an automatic death sentence, promote fear and stigma, and spread false hopes by uncritically promoting 'wonder cures'. Furthermore, stories about 'victims' or 'tragic heroes' deny readers an understanding of the reality of living with cancer. This style of coverage usually fails to ask crucial questions about what is needed to improve the experience of patients and their families. As a result, the general public remains ignorant about cancer, negative attitudes are reinforced and poor health services remain unchallenged.

We should not accept that bad media coverage of cancer is inevitable—many examples of excellent cancer journalism exist worldwide. Cancer is a challenging topic and journalists often face problems in accessing accurate and balanced information, finding credible sources, and resisting the pressure to sensationalize stories to get bigger headlines. This situation is not helped by the sensational nature of cancer press releases, issued by both commercial and non-commercial sources, with which the media is inundated every day. These press releases are written in a manner to catch

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K Redmond is Editor of Cancer World and Co-ordinator of the European School of Oncology's Media Program.

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a news editor's eye and secure coverage of an institution's or company's latest scientific discovery or product. This approach, however, does not allow a more-positive, but realistic, image of cancer to be cultivated.

Many journalists struggle with the task of writing or broadcasting cancer stories and would welcome more support from cancer organizations and individual experts—it is in all our interest that they produce more accurate and reliable cancer stories. The European School of Oncology (ESO) has recently taken a number of steps to promote more intelligent and critical coverage of cancer. Through its annual 'Best Cancer Reporter Award', the School recognizes some of the many outstanding cancer stories that appear regularly in magazines, newspapers and online publications. As part of its 25th anniversary, ESO is organizing a unique media forum titled "Cancer: Time for a Reality Check", which will be moderated by internationally renowned journalists and provide reporters with the opportunity to question leading researchers, clinicians, patient advocates and industry leaders about how they intend to meet the key challenges in cancer care today. In addition, the ESO is partnering with *Nature Clinical Practice Oncology* to identify important cancer research findings and generate weekly summaries for interested journalists.

These initiatives are examples of how organizations can work with the media to promote better quality coverage of cancer; however, much more needs to be done. It is probably impossible to eradicate sensationalist media reporting on cancer, but the oncology community can do much to address this unacceptable practice by working in partnership with the media and helping journalists to better understand the science behind their stories.