

Assessing the Quality of Health News Stories in
the Australian Media Using the Media Doctor
Website

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

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I hereby certify that this thesis is in the form of a series of published papers of which I am a joint author. I have included as part of the thesis a written statement from each co-author, endorsed by the Faculty Assistant Dean (Research Training), attesting to my contribution to the joint publications.

Amanda Wilson

(Date)

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Synopsis

This thesis by publication is composed of five peer-reviewed papers reporting on findings from data collected and analysed over a five year period. Each paper relates to the theme of the Media Doctor website as a tool for assessing and improving the quality of health reporting in the general Australian news media.

The first paper (Chapter 3) “Monitoring the quality of medical news reporting: Early experience with ‘*media doctor*’” presents early data, providing a baseline overview of health reporting using the four categories of pharmaceutical, surgical, diagnostic testing and ‘other’ stories. In Chapter 4, the second paper, “Media Reporting of Health Intervention: Signs of Improvement but Major Problems Persist” examines the changes in the quality of news stories in these categories. This paper also provides an analysis of how the individual items on the rating instrument differed between subject categories, outlets and over time. In Chapter 5, the third paper, “Does it matter who writes medical news stories” looks at differences in story quality by examining different author categories and whether news stories written by certain types of journalists have significant differences. The fourth and fifth papers examine the quality of news reporting of two specific types of story: 1) Complementary and Alternative Medicines (CAM) and 2) Stories about cancer (Chapter 6). “An analysis of news media coverage of complementary and alternative medicine” identified all news stories on the website that dealt with CAM interventions and analysed these in order to assess the overall quality compared with the scores of stories about mainstream health interventions. The fifth paper of the thesis “Deconstructing Cancer: What makes a good quality news story” looks at how the reporting of a specific disease, cancer, performs across both subject categories and rating items.

This thesis also examines the state of knowledge in the existing literature via extensive literature review of interventions to improve the reporting of health news stories, and the development of a validated rating instrument.

The thesis concludes by summarising the papers' findings to give an overall assessment of the quality of health news stories in Australia. The data reveals the strongest and weakest facets of health reporting and which media outlets and writers produced the 'best' and 'worst' quality health news stories in the context of the quality scores awarded using the rating instrument. It examines the impact of these findings on public health and explores interventions to improve reporting in this area.