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### Making news about medicines

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# SUMMARY

People are very interested in information about health and illness. Studies show that they are more interested in new medical discoveries than in sport in the news. Mass media channels (e.g. newspapers, television) do pay attention to information about health and illness. Both patients, health professionals and researchers use the mass media as source of information on medicine.

There has been much debate over the possible effects of the mass media during the last decades. Several examples of news about medicines showing effect have been described. For example, negative publicity in the mass media resulted in the change in women's "pill"-taking behaviour - a decline in the use of the oral contraceptives in the 1970s. The lay media was also an important communication channel in informing both patients and health professionals that the post-therapy contraception period after acitritin (Neotigason<sup>®</sup>) therapy was extended from two months to two years. According to a Dutch gynaecologist, family magazines were very helpful in introducing the sub-50 oral contraceptives in the Netherlands by giving attention to these new oral contraceptives. The women were advised to ask their physician for a 'low-dose pill'. Mass media reporting can also have effects on drug policy decisions. In July 1979, the Dutch Registration College imposed a six-month withdrawal of the product license for triazolam (Halcion<sup>®</sup>) in the Netherlands following public pressure initiated by a psychiatrist.

As shown above mass media reporting can have important effects. While most studies in mass communication have concentrated on the effect of mass media publicity it is equally important to understand the influences that shape the content. This is especially relevant since health professionals have been criticising al-

most continue the content of mass media messages about medicine and content determines the effect.

Critics argue that some diseases receive proportionally more media coverage than others, although they may be rare and have a low(er) incidence. Sometimes reports in the mass media raise false hopes. Mass media reporting about medicine(s) has contributed to medicalization since no critical analyses of new medical possibilities have been presented by the media.

The main question addressed in this thesis is: Which sources are used by journalists writing about medicines in daily newspapers and family or women's magazines? The choice of the sources determines to a large extent what kind of information about medicines becomes news.

In chapter 2 the sources used by journalists writing about medicines in daily newspapers are described. The results of this chapter are based on interviews with seven journalists and a content analysis of five daily newspapers.

In the interviews we asked the journalists about their sources of ideas and their sources of information. The scientific and medical literature is an important source of ideas, like press releases from universities. Press releases from pharmaceutical companies do play a role as source of ideas but are less important. Besides these sources, personal contacts between a journalist and a researcher can also lead to an idea for an article.

The most important source of information is the scientific and medical literature. Two reasons were given: (1) the most important developments are described in the journals and (2) the research that is reported is peer-reviewed prior to publication by experts giving the journalist a reasonable guarantee that the study has been performed properly and conclusions are drawn correctly. Direct contact with researchers is also important to gather information for an article. The pharmaceutical industry is not important as source of information according to the journalists because of the commercial interest companies have in mass media publicity.

The journalists have access to several journals, like the *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Science*, *Nature*, *The Lancet*, and the *British Medical Journal* to search for ideas and information. Besides these international scientific and professional medical journals, all the journalists read at least two Dutch medical or pharmaceutical journals and almost everyone read a popular science journal (e.g. *New Scientist*).

The content analysis of the newspaper articles on medicines shows the journals and researchers to be the important sources of

information. Noticeable is that in about 20% of all the articles a pharmaceutical company is mentioned.

In chapter 3 the role of the scientific and medical literature is studied in more detail. Our assumption is that drugs often discussed in the professional literature are also often discussed in the daily newspapers. In other words, we might well expect the scientific medical literature to set the agenda for the newspapers. A content analysis of scientific medical journals was combined with a content analysis of Dutch daily newspapers to study the agreement in the two agenda's. To classify the drugs discussed in the journals and the newspapers we used the Anatomical Therapeutic Chemical (ATC) system.

The results show an agreement in the main groups of medicines discussed in the scientific medical literature and newspapers. In both the newspapers and the professional journals antiinfective medication (ATC:J) and drugs for the central nervous system (ATC:N) are the groups of medicines most frequently discussed. An interesting difference is the attention paid to gynaecological products (ATC:G) and the homeopathic preparations in the newspapers.

Although it has been suggested that "bad news" is more newsworthy than "good news", the negative consequences of the use of medicines received proportionally more attention in the professional literature than in the newspapers.

Our findings that the drugs most often discussed in the scientific and medical literature also appear in the mass media suggests the agenda-setting role of these journals. If therefore some diseases or pharmaceuticals receive more attention than others in mass media reporting this can be partly explained by the preoccupation of the professional journals and not, as has been suggested by critics of media reporting, by the preoccupation of journalists themselves.

In chapter 4 the role and choice of experts is studied in more detail. Two approaches, interviews and a content analysis, were used to answer the research questions.

The journalists indicated to be very careful with medical news, including news about (new) drugs. Therefore, an important reason for consulting experts is to check information on medicines. In about half of the newspaper articles an expert was cited. We can distinguish five categories of experts: (1) researchers; (2) functional experts (e.g. physicians); (3) spokespeople of interest or professional groups; (4) spokespeople for companies and (5) patients. The experts from the first and second category are more often cited alone in an article whereas the experts from the other categories

are often combined with other experts in an article. Journalists seem to differentiate between two sorts of experts: the objective experts - researchers and functional experts - and the subjective experts - patients and spokespeople of interest groups and pharmaceutical companies.

The different experts, including patients, cited in the same article gave the same or complementary information. This is in contrast with, for example, political reporting, where experts are used to express different views.

The results of this chapter show that the journalists are able to find relevant experts to give them information about various medicines.

In chapter 5 we studied the role of the lay press as a communication channel for pharmaceutical companies. The results of this chapter are based on interviews with eight PR officers of pharmaceutical companies. The results of this study show that information from the pharmaceutical industry to the general public has become increasingly extensive and emphatic. Pharmaceutical companies consider that it is important to inform a lay audience about their products and about the diseases for which they can be used. The lay press, both daily newspapers and family magazines, can play an important role in informing a lay audience about diseases and new or improved products. If the lay press pays attention to these products many potential 'users' can be reached and the image of the company might be improved. Since directives promulgated by the European Union forbid the advertising of prescription drugs to the general public, one sees that pharmaceutical companies do approach mass media journalists with information about products in various ways at different moments. When an innovative medicine is approved, a press conference is sometimes organized. It appears to be common, on such occasion, to invite independent scientists and physicians to give information about the new product to the journalists who attend. Because journalists receive many invitations the respondents suggested a need for caution in such invitations to journalists. Another newsworthy event might be when something goes wrong with the company or one of its products. The mass media do play an important role in warning users of a prescription drug quickly, and not all users can be traced and will be informed through health care professionals, even in the Netherlands where health care is intensive and well organized.

In chapter 6 we studied the family magazines. The results in this chapter are based on interviews with four journalists and a content analysis of three family magazines.

The journalists reported to use different sources to get ideas for articles on health, illness and drugs. Letters from the readers, ideas brought up by colleagues, daily newspapers and press releases from different sources were mentioned as important sources of ideas. Only one respondent considered scientific and medical journals to be important sources of ideas and information. The magazines receive many letters from their readers. One of the respondents estimates that the magazine receives 200 letters a week, of which about twothirds concerned medical questions. In the provision of information physicians and medical specialists play an important role as sources of information for journalists. There is, however, until now no role for the pharmacist as source of information on medicines in family magazines.

Sometimes a magazine co-operates with a pharmaceutical company. A company may finance an enclosure about a disease or group of drugs.

The results of this study show that gynaecological products as well as drugs for the central nervous system receive much attention in family magazines. The kind of information given about medicines is limited. Only a proportion of the publications pay attention to the side effects of a drug therapy. Therefore health professionals confronted with patients asking questions about drugs in response to publications in family magazines should realize that the patient knows the name of a drug but is seldom informed about other aspects of the therapy, such as side effects.

In chapter 7, the final chapter, the results are discussed after making some remarks about the methods used.

In this study the approach has been qualitative because it is exploratory and qualitative methods are well suited in this type of study. The qualitative approach (in depth interviews) was combined with a quantitative approach (content analysis) in chapter two, four and six. The combination of a quantitative and qualitative approach should be used more often in this field of research. As shown in this thesis, the differing research approaches provide us with complementary information and have been very useful in the understanding of the process of making news about medicines.

The results of this thesis show the medical and scientific community to be the most important source of information used by newspaper journalists. This source may also have an interest in

mass media publicity. Sometimes researchers try to attract media exposure since publicity is thought to benefit applications for medical grants. Another reason to supply journalists with information about "unpublished" results is that rapid dissemination of information about promising new therapies is crucial for patients with severe illnesses that have no effective treatment; only for a tiny minority of studies, this urgency justifies unconventional communications. Journalists prefer to report about studies published in scientific and medical journals because of the peer-review system. Journalists indicate that a peer-review system is not always waterproof citing disputes involving the work of the Dutch professor Buck.

The criticism that bad news is more newsworthy than good news, cannot be confirmed in our study. On the contrary good news about medicines received more attention in newspapers than bad news. With respect to this point, the criticism that the way in which the mass media portray therapeutic developments is too optimistically seems true. This criticism also involves the scientific community who prefers to communicate their stories of success.

Some of the forms of criticism are related to differences in opinions about the role the mass media should serve. Especially health educators think that mass media journalists should have a responsibility and a role in patient education and counselling. Therefore, they are very concerned with the lack of practical information and the fact that some diseases are underreported in the mass media. Science journalists do think they have a task informing a general public about developments in science and to provide their audience with practical information about these developments. Science journalists, however, are autonomous in the selection of topics. They are guided by latest trends in science, not by the needs of health educators.

Family magazines, on the other hand, do provide their readers with practical information on several topics; health educators could try to co-operate with family magazines. This kind of co-operation has, in our opinion, several advantages. Family magazines do play a major role as an information source for the general public on health topics. Magazines could play a major role in health education, since the editors do know their audience very well. They know the needs, perceptions and language of their readers and are, therefore, in a position to pass on health messages in an effective way to a large audience. Their audience is, in fact, very interested in health related information. The pharmaceutical in-

dustry is well aware of the potential of this communication channel and is already using it. Health educators could try to co-operate with these magazines in a similar way, instead of wasting money to produce yet further brochures. If family magazines wish to assume a degree of responsibility in patient education they should pay attention to the side effects of drugs in all articles.

This thesis shows that journalists do use relevant information sources when writing about medicines. Finally journalists are responsible for articles in newspapers and family magazines, however, experts have a co-responsibility, because they are consulted by journalists. Experts have to supply journalists with balanced information on medicines. If an expert is asked for advise on something he is not an expert on, he should make that clear to a journalist and advise the journalist to consult someone else.