

Reporting medical stories in Australia.... What is the place of public relations?

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Abstract

This paper explores the perspectives of fifteen medical journalists and public relations practitioners interviewed in- depth nationwide on the role of public relations in medical news gathering and dissemination in Australia. This study is the second phase of mixed- methods research on the relationship between medical journalists and public relations practitioners and follows a quantitative online survey which examined their perceptions of each other in an Australian context (Furlan, 2009), using concepts of relational symmetry where dialogic encounters of mutual benefit depend on a two-way communicative process (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 2001).

Introduction

Dr Thomas Jamison has been credited with the birth of medical journalism in Australia. In 1804 a notice written by him appeared in the *Sydney Gazette* stating “cow pox is now fully established in the Colony” with an advisory to parents to vaccinate their children against smallpox (Miller, 2005). Despite humble beginnings, interest in popular science and medicine continued to grow in mid-19th century Australia in colonial periodicals (see for example, Coote, 2010) and today public interest in health/medical news remains strong (Wang and Gantz, 2007; Levi, 2001). According to Len Rios, Hinnant, Park, Cameron, Frisby, and Lee (2009b), “unlike general news, the value of health information relies on whether people can use it” (p.325). Scholarly literature on medical news has focussed mainly on its miscommunication and the frequent failure of medical stories “to put new developments into any kind of reasonable context for readers or viewers” (Dentzer, 2009, p.2).

Chapman and Lupton (1994) examined coverage of Australian medical news in a one-week period and the polarising hyperbole evident in television reports in news and current affairs programs. The authors noted medical news was portrayed using predictable framing strategies including:

The bizarre, the moral warning, the discrediting of high status individuals, the medico-scientific breakthrough and the contrasting low-tech reaffirmation of folk remedies or preventative measures... (Chapman and Lupton, 1994, p.101).

The Australian Press Council (a self-regulatory body of the print media) issued a “Health warning” guideline in 2001 for journalists reporting on “inadequately researched” medical news (Australian Press Council, 2001)¹. In 2005, a web site set up to monitor the quality of print, TV and online media’s reporting of medical news, found only half the reports surveyed received a “satisfactory”

rating against a number of criteria, including benefit to harm ratio, sources of information/conflicts of interest as well as heavy reliance on media release information (Smith, Wilson and Henry, 2005) and continues to rate poorly especially in commercial television current affairs programs (Wilson, Bonevski, Jones, and Henry, 2009).

The increasing influence of public relations in Australian news has been widely documented (see for example, Bacon, Taylor and Pavey, 2010; Young, 2007; Macnamara, 2001; Zawawi, 1994; Ward, 1991; Tiffen, 1989). In the first phase of this research reported elsewhere, twenty five Australian medical reporters and seventeen public relations consultants involved in medical promotion estimated a high proportion of medical news is generated by public relations. Seventy two percent of journalist respondents and 100% of public relations respondents who participated in a nationwide online survey, considered more than half or three quarters of medical news is generated by public relations (Furlan, 2009, p.66).

The study reported in this paper explores the perspectives of seven medical journalists and eight public relations practitioners involved in medical promotion in semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or by telephone nation-wide. This paper will focus only on a sample of their responses during the second phase of research exploring the relationship between medical journalists and public relations consultants, which has received scant scholarly attention in an Australian context.

Background

Increased newsroom pressures on productivity, onerous deadlines and commercial “bottom line” constraints find journalists and public relations practitioners collaborating on medical news production even in “quality” news organisations (Lewis, Williams and Franklin, 2008). Although the public can obtain information about the latest medical information from numerous sources, including doctors, online sites, television shows, films and magazines (Friedman, 2004), the news media play an important role in bringing visibility to medical/health issues, informing the public and even the medical community about the latest scientific advances, debates and controversies (Wang and Gantz, 2007; Levi, 2001). The news media can change consumer behaviour as well as government policy (Chapman, McLeod, Wakefield and Holding, 2005; Schwitzer, Mudur, Henry, Wilson, Goozner, Simbra, Sweet and Baverstock, 2005; Friedman, 2004). The amount of coverage and time devoted to a topic in the news media can influence how important it is considered by mass audiences (the users of health care) and their perceptions of it (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). This agenda-setting function by news media can also influence health policy-makers and providers as well as other interest groups competing to have their voices heard (Seale, 2003).

Public relations practitioners regularly send newsrooms unsolicited, free material on behalf of clients, to help reporters “do their jobs more efficiently by providing ideas, access and resources” (Marconi, 2004, p.185). The public relations publicity tools, regarded as “information subsidies” (see Gandy, 1982), include press kits, news releases, video news releases and actualities (sound bites for

radio) (Guth and Marsh, 2003) which reporters usually regard as having self-serving motives “in an effort to gain ink and air time” (Sallot, Steinfatt and Salwen, 1998, p. 374). The relationship between journalists and public relations consultants involved in medical news production is therefore an important consideration in the process of disseminating accurate and timely health information publicly.

There has been emerging research on the relationship between medical journalists and their public relations sources in the U.S. with differing results. In the public relations literature, medical reporters’ dependence on public relations practitioners has been found to be partly due to reporters’ lack of training in the medical/scientific area, which encourages a reliance on expert sources who can translate research results and terminology into lay language (Cho and Cameron, 2007; Tanner, 2004). Yet, a recent study of newspaper and freelance health journalists found they were “more reluctant to use public relations material than are other journalists” (Len-Rios, Hinnant and Park, 2009a, p.56) and that “journalists rated non-public relations sources (other news media, self-interest/news staff, news audiences) as more important in generating story ideas” (Len-Rios et al, 2009b, p.324). The authors conclude that “agenda-building in health journalism may be dissimilar to that of traditional news reporting” (p.325). Len-Rios *et al* (2009b) posit that the “heightened value of the audience experience” (p.325) may explain the reluctance of reporters to use free public relations material when writing health/medical stories.

A framework of relational symmetry, where dialogic encounters of mutual benefit depend on a two-way communicative process where there is disclosure and trust, has been the dominant paradigm in public relations literature for more than twenty years and a requirement for public relations excellence (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 2001). This model of ideal public relations practice is also considered necessary in disseminating accurate and timely medical/health messages to the public (Avery and Lariscy, 2007). Concepts of relational symmetry (characterised by accommodation and cooperation) or asymmetry (persuasion) between an organisation and its publics has been refined into a mixed motive approach (see Grunig, Grunig and Dozier, 2002,) where on the one hand, “the views and interests of the organisation are sometimes justifiably pursued, while on other occasions the views and interests of stakeholders need to be accommodated” (Macnamara, 2010a, p.2). Macnamara (2010b) posits that public relations in normative models emphasises two-way communication but “in practice relies often on one-way transmission of information such as media releases, speeches and newsletters”, and is now broadening its focus “to include engagement through blogs, social networks, online chat, and microblogging such as Twitter” (p. 12).

Journalism’s dependence on elite sources has enabled public relations to sometimes use a mostly unquestioning media as free advertising for their medical clients, particularly pharmaceutical companies (Lieberman, 2005). White and Hobsbawm (2007) noted the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners “is often soured on both sides by the preconceptions or prejudices with which both groups approach each other” (p.284). For example, journalists have a long tradition of regarding public relations practitioners with contempt even though they want public relations information easily available (DeLorme and Fedler, 2003). Public relations practitioners have regarded journalists “as incompetent bunglers who quote out of context and sensationalize the negative” (Stegall and Sanders, 1986, p.341). The relationship between the

professions is therefore complex and relational dynamics are characterised by both conflict and cooperation (Charron, 1989).

Critics of public relations point out how public relations uses the power of the “third party technique” that is, “invisibly courting what appear to the public as independent players, and incorporating them as part of a PR strategy for a client’s benefit” (Burton, 2007, p.21). This is relevant in medical news where an “independent” expert source may have undisclosed vested interests (Larsson, Oxman, Carling and Herrin, 2003; Zuckerman, 2002). Public relations scholars have highlighted the “significant contribution” public relations makes “to organisations, the community, and to society as a whole” and its importance in relational exchanges where communication is ethical and all parties benefit: “the media often portray public relations as spin, hype, and propaganda but this is an outdated view and no longer appropriate to or reflective of contemporary practice” (Chia, 2009, p. 4). The polarity evident in the literature of, on the one hand, an esteemed view of public relations and on the other, a condemnation of it, reflects a similar, complex duality evident in the relationship between journalists and their public relations sources, with a “love-hate” dyad documented in relational research involving these two professions (Sallot and Johnson, 2006).

Methodology

The research reported here is part of the second phase of a mixed-methods study, and follows an anonymous, nation-wide survey conducted in 2008 which explored the perceptions of twenty five medical journalists and seventeen public relations practitioners involved in medical promotion (Furlan, 2009). The results of the quantitative online survey informed the planning of the second stage of the research, the semi-structured interviews with selected participants, which informs this paper. The data collected in the survey instrument was used to formulate the type of questions asked during the interviews in order to seek further clarification and explore meaning in-depth. A qualitative approach can focus on the rich descriptions of respondents as they recount their everyday perceptions and feelings allowing for the “sense making” of lived experiences in a given context (Richie and Lewis, 2003, p. 7). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative data is “fundamentally well suited for locating the *meanings* people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives” (p. 10).

Journalists (some high profile) represented all media including print (JP1, JP2, JP3, JP4), radio/online (JR1) and TV (JTV1, JTV2). Three participants were male, four were female. Three had previously worked in public relations and almost all (n=6) had more than a decade experience as medical/health reporters. Only one journalist, aged 36-45, had less than four years experience in this area of reporting. Most participants were in the 46-55 age-bracket. Even though the participants were sourced as medical reporters, only one used the title of “full-time medical reporter”. Three reporters considered themselves generic full-time reporters reflecting the work place realities in many newsrooms where journalists are regularly expected to perform duties beyond their areas of expertise or interest. One participant was a “part-time medical journalist” with other reporting

duties; another was a “full-time *health* reporter”; and one participant preferred “freelance journalist” despite a high-profile reputation in the medical journalism field. There were varying opinions of what constitutes “health” as opposed to “medical” news and a detailed discussion of these will take place in a future publication.

Public relations practitioners interviewed were from the following sectors: corporate (PRC1, PRC2), private (PRP1, PRP2), state government (PRG1), public hospital (PRH1) and medical research institutes (PRMR1, PRMR2). Three interviewees were female, five were male and almost all (n=7) had significant experience in the medical sector ranging from 10-25 years. Only one public relations consultant had less than four years experience in the field. There were a range of ages represented with two respondents between 26 and 35 years, three aged between 36 and 45, one aged 46 to 55, another 56 to 64 years of age and one interviewee was a director of a public relations firm aged over 65. Two participants were Directors of their respective organisations (PRC2 & PRP1).

The semi-structured interviews were important to facilitate not only a focus on the key areas of research- the perceptions of medical journalists and public relations consultants involved in medical promotion-but also a flexibility in the interviews to adapt to their perspectives and responses. This paper will only examine the responses of journalist participants to the following three questions:

1. How necessary are PR practitioners in getting the story and access to sources?
2. To what extent do you rely on public relations in medical news gathering?
3. Do you think public relations important in the process of informing the public about medicine/health?

Public relations participants’ responses to the following three questions are also examined:

1. How necessary are reporters in getting the story to the public?
2. How important or unimportant are media relations in medical PR?
3. Do you agree or disagree that medical journalists need PR to do their jobs?

All interviews, either face-to-face or by telephone, lasted between forty and seventy minutes and were recorded on digital tape and transcribed. Data was collated and tabulated for easy reference using principles of data reduction outlined by Saldana (2009) and Miles and Huberman (1994). Values coding was used to more accurately determine the meaning in interview transcripts. In addition, field notes taken immediately after the semi-structured interviews “in which naturalistic participant actions are documented” (Saldana, 2009) were also coded enhancing the “trustworthiness of the findings” and corroborating the coding (p. 90).

Findings: Journalist interviews

More than half of journalist participants (n=4), downplayed the role of public relations practitioners in getting “the story and access to sources” (Q1) as well as their reliance on public relations in their medical news gathering (Q2) (n=4). Yet journalist participants noted it depended on whether the public relations source comes from corporate, private, hospital or medical institutes with a mistrust of commercial public relations. Therefore, on the one hand, respondents were critical of public relations professionals in medical news gathering, and on the other, were accepting of public relations assistance and messages which were considered useful to the public and trustworthy. Most interviewees (n=5) responded negatively when asked question 3: *Do you think public relations important in the process of informing the public about medicine/health?* Again, the provenance of the public relations source was considered a key consideration. Two journalists (JTV2, JP2) had a more pragmatic approach to public relations, considered useful and necessary, since a public relations intermediary was viewed as often the only access to elite medical sources.

Negative responses: Public relations considered unnecessary/unimportant

A TV reporter indicated using public relations “very little” in medical news gathering, preferring to contact sources directly (researchers, doctors etc) rather than using a public relations professional: “I’ve developed that relationship, that’s allowed me to do that because I’ve done so many stories, you know, previous stories with these people that I feel comfortable ringing them, they’re quite happy to take my call” (JTV1). According to this respondent, commercial public relations agencies promoting medical news assume that because it’s a medical story it’ll be “automatically” picked up by the media which “makes it difficult and what sort of sours the relationship somewhat” (JTV1). This interviewee likened the process of maintaining journalistic independence to getting a second opinion when going to the doctor. Similarly, a print medical reporter observed, “I think too often the agendas of the PRs person’s client is not to inform but to promote and I think there is a fundamental difference between promotion and information” (JP3). Another print medical journalist remarked that “I would always rather see health information come from an independent source, you know, that is for the public’s benefit” noting that even public relations emanating from health NGOs are “all about message which is often spun a particular way” (JP4). This participant usually does not use public relations: “occasionally, I need to get their approval in order to be able to speak to people I want to speak to, but they’re not sort of driving the stories that I do or how I do them” (JP4).

Positive responses: Public relations considered necessary/important

The radio/online reporter described reliance on public relations as “almost zilch” (JR1) yet used public relations information at times. Non commercial organisations were again viewed favourably if their messages were in the public’s interest, for example, in raising awareness and/or understanding of health issues:

So where at the end of the day there is a net public benefit for it, those sorts of PR people can be – a message coming through the PR channels like that- can hit a mark with me and

other journalists as well and in that case they're useful because you wouldn't otherwise know about them . . . (JR1)

A TV respondent who had indicated being at arm's length from corporate/private public relations sources as "there is a commercial outcome there and I know that as a journalist and I've got to be very careful to maintain my distance and not make the thing seem like an ad" (JTV1), also viewed public relations from hospitals and medical research institutes as more credible, "the research is done there", and public relations from these organisations as important in the process of informing the public about medicine/health (Q3).

The other TV participant observed:

Well, given most organizations very tightly control information now I suppose they're seen as an indispensable part of the whole communication process. You're rarely going to be able to get access to other sources within organizations and they're the first point of call as well. (JTV2)

This TV participant also noted a "significant" reliance on public relations "in getting information out there, defining what that information is, making it understandable, getting access to people to talk about stories" (JTV2). The TV reporter was clear about the importance of public relations in informing the public about the latest medical/health news: "They definitely do help smooth the way between the raw information which is obviously very technical information, getting that out to the media who can make that understandable for the public which should be the main aim" (JTV2).

The radio/online reporter made a distinction between using press releases from medical journals and those emanating from other organisations using public relations: "I would put them in a different category from somebody who is trying to publicise a product or a service that their client has introduced" (JR1). One print medical reporter (JP2) who regularly uses public relations material ("about 40% of the time" in finding stories), described a relationship of trust with on-going public relations sources: "they trust me and I trust them and they will give me access to the people I need to speak to and often they're happy for me to have these people's mobile number so I can call them any time."

Findings: public relations practitioner interviews

Public relations participants were more positive overall in answering the three questions under scrutiny than journalist respondents. Although public relations interviewees considered reporters necessary in getting medical news to the public (Q1), two respondents (one working for a medical research institute, PRMR1, the other for a public hospital, PRH1), qualified their answers noting the need for publicity depended on type of story or intended audience. Although respondents considered media relations to be important in their work (Q2) two consultants, both working for medical research institutes (PRMR1 &2) also considered type of story and relationship with other

stakeholders (not just the public) as having equal value. Six participants agreed medical journalists need public relations to do their work (Q3). One corporate respondent (PRC2) disagreed and a director of a private public relations firm (PRP2) was reluctant to rate the quality of public relations information and whether or not it would be useful to reporters generally.

Responses

Most interviewees described journalists as “absolutely critical”, “vital”, “essential” or “crucial” in helping to disseminate medical messages publicly (Q1). However, one medical institute media public relations consultant noted that the media are not necessarily the most important element:

We've got relationships with members of our institutes as well and so we do a number of things with them which certainly don't involve external PR that's more sort of internal PR and those relationships are of equal value as well. (PRMR 2)

The other medical research institute respondent used the web to communicate medical news to the scientific community so reporters are “not 100% necessary” “unless we want to target the wider public” (PRMR1). Similarly, a public hospital public relations manager considered journalists to be “of great assistance, for instance, if we are trying to promote a research study or ask the community to call a certain number to donate funds for something” yet at other times can be a hindrance:

If I were to contact a journalist to promote a new service here, and the article focused on how long it took to get that service up and running and why it wasn't there beforehand, and was critical of government, that's quite detrimental to the reasons that I wanted to get an article out there, so, it does work both ways. (PRH1)

A state government health public relations media unit manager described reporters as “absolutely crucial in getting the message to the public, even with the rise of new media” (PRG1).

The majority of respondents considered media relations an important part of medical public relations (Q2). One research public relations manager indicated that media relations was “absolutely critical because you're not going to get the message out to the general public unless you collaborate with the media” for example, in “trying to explain the benefits of getting the ‘flu vaccine” (PRMR1). According to this respondent, in “niche” areas of research that doesn't affect the general public directly, only specialised media (those who work in medical journals, for example) would be involved. Similarly, a director of a private public relations firm, made a distinction between the “trade” press (journalists working for specialised medical journals such as the *Medical Journal of Australia: MJA*), reporters working in quality print and those in broadcast or tabloid media: “so, the journalists that work for the AMAⁱⁱ and the MJA, are, as important as, if not more important than, the journalists that work for the popular press” (PRP2). The public hospital media unit manager regarded media relations highly even in negative situations:

[H]aving that positive media relationship helps to diffuse a situation, or, it can help to get an insight into how the media are going to report something before it is reported, so you can

start, you know, crisis or issues management, and prepare for the worst, so I think the media relations part of it is critical. (PRH1)

In answering question three, *Do you agree or disagree that medical journalists need PR information in order to do their jobs*, almost all PR respondents (n=6) responded affirmatively. One medical research institute public relations manager pointed out that increasingly, story enquiries were from general reporters not necessarily medical journalists and therefore the need for public relations was greater: “so they would need to have collaboration with medical PR to actually get the accurate information out there” (PRMR1). One private public relations director (PRP2) wasn’t sure as it depended on the degree the public relations company specialises in health and whether or not reporters were working in medical media or in general media. The corporate public relations director was more cautious noting that journalists are capable of finding stories themselves “and never deal with any PR people” (PRC2). The other corporate public relations respondent observed:

There is so much information out there, I would like to think that we are going some way to making their job a little bit easier by providing them with some information that they necessarily may not be able to get in touch with or the people that they may not be able to speak with. (PRC1)

A participant also noted the media’s shrinking resources made them more reliant on public relations: “the stand out problem concerning media organisations for the past decade has been that they have been down sizing so it’s clearly a relationship that journalists require PR people in order to get their job done” (PRMR2). This sentiment was echoed by others. For example, the public hospital interviewee observed that journalists’ work “would be very difficult without PR people” (PRH1). The state government health media manager also pointed out how some “nuts and bolts” information can only be obtained through their office.

Discussion

Journalist participants were cautious when assessing the role of public relations and its influence on their medical news gathering. It is unclear whether or not self-reported use of public relations is understated “to maintain the appearance of journalistic integrity” (Len Rios *et al.*, 2009b, p. 326). However, there was a sense of avoidance by participants of commercial or corporate public relations information which was seen as “advertising” or promoting a product or service. One print journalist was dismissive of the importance of public relations in medical news gathering generally: “you can usually find people in some other way these days, on the internet, you know, you can find everybody” (JP1). Hospital, medical research institute public relations or not-for-profit groups were seen as more “genuine” and trustworthy sources overall. Interestingly, public relations participants working in hospitals or medical research institutes were the ones who most downplayed the role of journalists and media relations in questions 1 & 2. These practitioners work in research niche areas where other stakeholders (such as the scientific/research/academic communities) are as important,

if not more so, than the general public, depending on type of story requiring publicity or mass dissemination.

Journalists generally portrayed themselves as being very proactive in getting their own medical/health stories. It is unclear whether this is genuine or simply an opportunity to appear to be doing the right thing, professionally-speaking, since independently sourcing one's own stories is considered a fundamental imperative in journalism and part of society's watch-dog role (Plaisance and Skewes, 2003). Journalists reporting on difficult topics, such as science/medicine often resort to the help of public relations practitioners who are more likely to influence reporters' stories because they are dealing with knowledge which is "less accessible to journalists, who typically do not have educational backgrounds in specialised, abstract knowledge areas" (Anderson and Lowrey, 2007, p. 390). One print medical reporter remarked that everyone uses public relations (even advocacy groups if they can afford it): "so that's not in itself necessarily a problem in my mind. The problem is the inordinate influence that those PR practitioners can sometimes have over the coverage that results" (JP4). The radio/online journalist did not regard press releases (often written by public relations staff) from refereed medical journals as public relations. This illustrates a narrow understanding of the breadth and scope of public relations activity. After-all, press releases or research summaries released by prestigious medical journals can set the media agenda and influence what is reported publicly in the news, even if there are inaccuracies (Woloshin and Schwartz, 2002).

There was a mistrustful tension evident among most journalists regarding public relations sources, with concerns that if public relations continues to "swing away from direct advertising towards influencing journalism, it's going to have a backlash at some point when journalists wake up and find they're being manipulated, they will tend to discount the whole industry, you know" (JR1). However, two reporters, one working as a print medical journalist, the other in television news, described public relations as useful in day-to-day work while maintaining critical evaluation skills: "As long as there are journalists out there who don't just re-type press releases and actually look at it properly and, you know, check it out" (JP2). The evidence of an adversarial relationship between the two professions is consistent with overseas research (DeLorme and Fedler, 2003; Sallot and Johnson, 2006; Shin and Cameron, 2003) as is the existence of a more collaborative relationship between the two professions in medical news (Tanner, 2004). There was some evidence in this study that journalists who had regular communication with trusted public relations sources developed a good working relationship with them. According to Cho and Cameron, (2007) "regular contact breeds close relationships, respect and trust" (p. 182).

Public relations interviewees were mostly positive about the importance and usefulness of media relations in their work, of getting the information to the public through the media and of reporters' need for public relations in writing a medical story. A corporate respondent pointed out how "there's a lot of public interest in what's going on in the health sphere and there's a lot of news value inherent in that" (PRC2). Another respondent, a director of a private public relations company (PRP1), noted that the type of public relations influence or need for public relations depends on where the journalist works, whether a specialised journal/magazine or the mass media. There was evidence of a pragmatic mixed-motive model of communication where both parties obtain goals

through a process of negotiation involving a dyad of conflict and cooperation, in which the former pertains to the “struggle over newsmaking” and the latter, a necessary “exchange of resources” (Charron, 1989, p. 43).

Public relations respondents working in what journalists regarded as more reliable and trustworthy organisations, such as public hospitals or research institutes, were more likely to downplay the need for reporters generally as much of their work does not necessarily require mass media dissemination. Two public relations respondents, both public relations directors, one corporate, the other private, did not agree that medical journalists need public relations information to do their jobs (Q3). This was surprising as U.S. research shows that public relations practitioners usually estimate a higher percentage of public relations influence on news generally than journalists’ estimates (Sallot *et al*, 1998, p. 373).

Conclusion

Overall, medical journalists interviewed did not consider public relations a necessary component of their work, although there was an acknowledgment that there is sometimes a “need” for public relations services to get to appropriate sources or even the story itself. Two journalists (one working in print, the other in television) were more forthcoming about using public relations and acknowledged its importance in medical news gathering as long as journalistic independence and verification remained intact. Public relations practitioners working in the corporate or commercial sectors were the most criticised by journalists (regardless of their media organisation) because of perceived self-serving motives. Yet corporate and commercial public relations participants best understood media wants and needs and downplayed their role in promoting clients’ interests to the public through the media. According to these respondents, journalists did not necessarily *need* their services acknowledging reporters could find the information elsewhere, but were considered more than likely to use their “information subsidies” anyway.

The professions of journalism and public relations are undergoing a rapid change. Emerging forms of hybridised e-media such as blogs (including micro-blogging i.e. Twitter) and social networking sites (for example, Facebook, MySpace) are challenging traditional media platforms for news gathering, dissemination and analysis. Public relations is increasingly adapting to the interactive capabilities of social media for relationship-building and two-way communication with its publics, a process which fosters a more symmetrical, authentic dialogue of communication to occur (Macnamara, 2010c; Waters, Tindall, and Morton, 2010). How these changes will affect the relationship between the two professions or their collaboration in the production of medical news in the future remains to be seen. The respondents in this qualitative study were mostly very experienced in their professions and therefore almost exclusively belonged to an older demographic. Journalists represented mostly traditional media platforms and newsgathering techniques. How much younger, less experienced reporters producing medical news working in “emerging” media would view public relations is unknown at this stage. Similarly, younger public relations practitioners using social media to communicate with stakeholders may have differing views to those expressed in this study.

Regardless of how or where future interaction takes place between the two professions, a number of characteristics are considered important in maintaining good relationships including trust, commitment, satisfaction and dialogue (Kent and Taylor, 2002). According to Jahansoozi (2006), trust becomes even more important in long-term relationships, and where there is a breakdown in trust and rebuilding needs to occur, transparency is the critical variable which “promotes accountability, collaboration, cooperation and commitment” (p. 943). It is unclear at this stage whether the type of relationship journalists have with public relations practitioners has any bearing on the quality of their medical news reports. If there is a relationship of respect or trust, there is more likely to be a free exchange of information between the professions without resentment or impediment. Whether the quality of medical news can be traced back to the quality of particular relationships between the professions remains to be seen and could be explored in future research.

While this study is limited in generalisability and scope, it appears medical journalists generally downplay the usefulness of, and need for public relations in their newsgathering. Nonetheless, there is evidence that medical news reporting in Australia relies on pre-packaged public relations information (Smith *et al*, 2005; Wilson *et al*, 2009). Recent research in Australia has revealed that most medical/health stories are written by generalist reporters (Wilson, Robertson, McElduff, Jones, and Henry, 2010) and even though reporters may be considered “medical reporters” by their organisation, they are likely to also have general reporting duties. However, stories written by specialised medical/health reporters “were superior to those written by other groups” (Wilson *et al*, 2010, p. 2). The growing links between journalism and public relations need to be further explored so that this area of reporting can improve in reliability, accuracy and fairness to ensure reasoned, informed public debate on matters of health.

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ⁱ <http://www.presscouncil.org.au/pcsite/activities/guides/gpr245.html>

ⁱⁱ Australian Medical Association