

Q&A

# Cancer Journalism – On Life Support?

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In these extraordinary times, traditional journalism has increasingly come under attack. With the rise of social media, the decline of print circulation, and the fractious polarization of society, medical news faces unique challenges.

The pace and complexity of cancer research poses practical challenges for both journalists and the general population, and the conclusions drawn can have consequences for individuals as well as public policy. Stories of advances in cancer treatments, laden with superlatives such as “miracle,” “cure,” or “breakthrough” generate enormous interest and can foster unrealistic hopes and misunderstanding among patients. Excited patients are eager to discuss the latest Twitter feed or Facebook post promising a revolutionary new finding. However, half of the cancer drugs touted as ‘cures’ and ‘miracles’ by journalists are not approved by the FDA. As stated in NPR Health, “If A New Cancer Drug is Hailed As A Breakthrough, Odds Are It’s Not.”

Since the major advances in medicine that followed World War II, there has been a tendency to celebrate medical heroism. However, the most meaningful advances have been attributed to incrementalism. Slow, imperfect and often hard to easily describe, these significant gains are under-reported and poorly recognized. The 25% decline in death rate from cancer in the USA between 1991

and 2014 is a dramatic example of the success of modern oncology, but the coverage in the media barely registered.

Negative reports about cancer treatments are numerous. From the rising cost of care, perceived therapeutic inefficacy, profiteering conduct of the pharmaceutical industry, and unethical behavior of a few notorious clinicians and researchers, these stories feed on anger over high drug prices, economic inequality, and political tensions. Patients often come for treatment already carrying the burden of skepticism and distrust in the health care system.

As social media’s reach has grown, the traditional information gatekeepers have been cast aside. Anyone with an opinion, no matter how well-informed, can disseminate their ideas in the online free-for-all. Separating fact from fiction is more challenging now than ever before. It is a telling and sobering truism that the most exciting scientific advances are typically first reported in the business news rather than in medical journals.

Cancer news has impacted society since the 1970s when First Lady Betty Ford underwent a mastectomy for breast cancer. From Ronald Reagan’s colon

cancer surgery to Katie Couric’s live televised colonoscopy to Angelina Jolie’s mastectomies, Ben Stiller’s prostate surgery and Patrick Swayze’s heroic battle with pancreatic cancer, public figures are able to keep cancer a part of our daily national conversation.

High quality cancer journalism is a vital mechanism to inform the public of changes in treatments. Incremental advances must be recognized and celebrated. Transparency in reporting is critical in securing the public trust, and cancer news, both positive and negative, must be accessible, fair minded and dispassionate in order to flourish.

*This piece was inspired by a manuscript entitled Can Cancer Truths Be Told? Challenges for Medical Journalism by Elaine Schattner, M.D., published in the 2017 ASCO Educational Book.*

