

A short tipsheet for better reporting of tests, treatments, and diagnoses



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OVERDIAGNOSIS AND OVERTREATMENT

Here are 5 simple questions, or tips, to consider when writing health stories. They're not intended as strict guidance, but a list of some key things to think about and perhaps discuss with a range of contacts, including researchers who are independent from whoever is promoting a new test or treatment. They have arisen from evidence that media stories often tend to overplay benefits, play down harms and ignore important conflicts of interest. Consideration of these questions may lead a reporter's research in unexpected directions.

1 What are the potential benefits of this test or treatment?

It's valuable to routinely ask whether benefits might be overplayed in any way, for example by statistics presented in relative rather than absolute terms, or using weaker surrogate outcomes, rather than outcomes that are important to people. Great care is needed to avoid miracle language that hypes tests or treatments and creates false hope.

2 What are the potential harms of this test or treatment?

It's vitally important to routinely think about and report possible harms. For tests, this could include 'false positives', where tests wrongly indicate someone has an illness, or 'overdiagnosis', when tests identify 'abnormalities' that will never cause trouble if left undetected. For treatments, harms could include side effects or complications.

3 Has the disease or condition been expanded, bringing a risk people are overdiagnosed?

Many diseases have been expanded, labelling more people with very mild problems or at very low risk of future illness. Many of those newly labelled people may be overdiagnosed, meaning the label will bring them more harm than good (e.g. being unnecessarily treated).

4 Are there conflicts of interest among those promoting the test, treatment, or diagnosis?

There is strong evidence that financial conflicts of interest can distort medical research, education and practice. It's considered vital that important conflicts of interest are reported, such as sponsorship of studies or payments to researchers. Routinely seeking independent views is also recommended.

5 What levels of evidence support the claims being made about a test or treatment?

It's valuable to inform people about the strength of the evidence behind a claim about a test or treatment. Questions to consider include: Is the evidence from a press release? Is the data interim or final? Is it from a pre-print or peer-reviewed? Is it from a single study or a systematic review of all studies? What was the sample size? Is it human or animal? How does it compare to other available evidence?

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