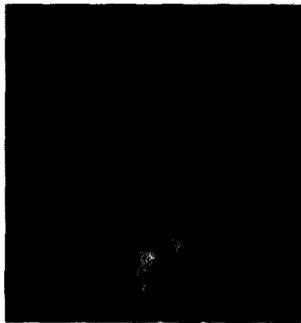

EDITOR'S PAGE



Sensationalism and the News Media

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Recently, an abstract presentation at the 35th Annual Conference on Cardiovascular Disease, Epidemiology, and Prevention received widespread publicity in the lay press (1). Unfortunately, this small retrospective analysis did not control for many confounding factors. Nevertheless, the conclusion of the presentation was that high doses of calcium entry blocking agents increased the risk of myocardial infarction in patients treated for hypertension. This prompted an unprecedented number of phone calls and letters to physicians from patients who were receiving such drugs. Many patients simply stopped taking their calcium blockers on the basis of the news stories. Our office was also bombarded with queries from concerned patients, and considerable time was spent in discussing the matter with individual patients. To their credit, the American College of Cardiology, American Heart Association and the American College of Physicians all urged in the lay press that patients should not unilaterally discontinue such drugs but should discuss their concerns with their physician.

In this editorial I do not intend to discuss the report itself because it has not yet been published in a peer-reviewed journal. Rather, I offer a reminder of the guidelines related to lay press reporting of scientific reports. The document "Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals" (to which *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* [JACC] adheres), written by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (2), contains the following (the second paragraph is especially noteworthy in light of the previous discussion):

Medical Journals and the Popular Media

The public's interest in news of medical research has led the popular media to compete vigorously to get information about research as soon as possible. Researchers and institutions sometimes encourage the reporting of research in the popular

media before full publication in a scientific journal by holding a press conference or giving interviews.

The public is entitled to important medical information without unreasonable delay, and editors have a responsibility to do their part in this process. Doctors need to have reports available in full detail, however, before they can advise their patients about the conclusions. In addition, media reports of scientific research before the work has been peer reviewed and fully published may lead to the dissemination of inaccurate or premature conclusions.

Editors may find the following recommendations useful as they seek to establish policies on these issues.

1) Editors can foster the orderly transmission of medical information from researchers, through peer-reviewed journals, to the public. This can be accomplished by an agreement with authors that they will not publicize their work while their manuscript is under consideration or awaiting publication, and an agreement with the media that they will not release their stories before publication in the journal, in return for which the journal will cooperate with them in preparing accurate stories (see below).

2) Very little medical research has such clear and urgently important clinical implications for the public's health that the news must be released before full publication in a journal. In such exceptional circumstances, however, appropriate authorities responsible for public health should make the decision and should be responsible for the advance dissemination of information to physicians and the media. If the author and the appropriate authorities wish to have a manuscript considered by a particular journal, the editor should be consulted before any public release. If editors accept the need for immediate release, they should waive their policies limiting pre-publication publicity.

3) Policies designed to limit pre-publication should not apply to accounts in the media of presentations at scientific meetings or to the abstracts from these meetings (see Prior and Duplicate Publication). Researchers who present their work at a scientific meeting should feel free to discuss their presentations with reporters, but they should be discouraged from offering more detail about their study than was presented in their talk.

4) When an article is soon to be published, editors may

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wish to help the media prepare accurate reports by providing news releases, answering questions, supplying advance copies of the journal, or referring reporters to the appropriate experts. This assistance should be contingent upon the cooperation of the media in timing their release of stories to coincide with the publication of the area. (*Approved 1993*)

In keeping with item 3, *JACC* does issue press statements on up to two articles that I deem especially newsworthy in each issue. These releases are prepared in association with the authors and have been well received and widely published in the lay press. We are especially interested in a balanced discussion rather than a sensational headline. When we do publish articles in *JACC* that may be controversial, we generally include an editorial written by an expert in the field who can provide a balanced viewpoint and place the article in question in perspective with regard to the published literature.

It seems self-evident to me that authors have a responsibil-

ity to avoid sensationalism by presenting a balanced story. Similarly, the lay press should avoid pushing for strong statements and should seek expert opinion to help interpret new, "sensational" stories. More important, all such discussion is best reserved until the report in question is fully published in a peer-reviewed journal. Otherwise, we will continue to have incidents of this kind, which cause so much needless anxiety among patients and consume so much physician time in response, based only on an abstract that may be unavailable.

References

1. Psaty BM, Heckbert SR, Koepsell TD, et al. The risk of incident myocardial infarction associated with antihypertensive drug therapies [abstract]. *Circulation* 1995;91:925.
2. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Medical journals and the popular media. *N Engl J Med* 1993;328:1283.