

How to Make the Media Your Public Health Partner



Your local media can help you promote good health care to your entire community.

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Covered in FPM Quiz

The public is saturated with health care information. With the Internet, newspapers, magazines, radio and television, the media possess myriad outlets through which to feed health care news to the public. Much of what is available is either new research or proprietary information that may be difficult for patients to understand and apply meaningfully in their own lives. Similarly, there is a variety of information on alternative medicine, the accuracy and utility of which ranges from healthy and useful to impractical and dangerous. As family physicians, we have a unique opportunity to act as translators for health care consumers. By using the media as an educational tool, we can accurately communicate the practical aspects of health-related concepts beyond our own practices.

Taking your message to the masses

The word “doctor” is derived from the Latin “docere,” which means “to teach.” We do this daily as we deliver care to our patients. Working with the media is an extension of what we do in an office visit applied to a larger audience. As family physicians, our reputation for honesty, our broad expertise and our ability to communicate with a wide range of individuals make us appealing sources of medical information. As the public’s insatiable thirst

for health information continues, family physicians who have an interest in pursuing media relations will find many occasions to do so. The key is to think positively and view the media proactively as an unrivaled method of conveying worthwhile information to a large number of people.

Medical news falls into several categories. A basic understanding of some of these categories will help you prepare for your interactions with the media. For example,

you can promote good health by stressing the importance of choices people make in everyday life, such as wearing a seat belt or maintaining a healthy diet. You can advocate disease prevention through more

complicated interventions, such as immunizations, medications or procedures. Finally, you can explain and analyze new medications and other so-called “hot topics” in medical news. These may present the most opportunities for media comment.

Your goals for imparting clear, concise communication in any of these medical news areas should include the following:

- **Demystification.** To increase the accessibility of medical knowledge to the public and assert that physicians are approachable. You can do this by converting medical terms into concepts the public can understand.
- **Encouragement.** To encourage early

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disease detection and suggest ways to alter one's lifestyle to stay healthy.

• **Skills development.** To explain how people can develop competent health skills. For example, you can teach patients and their families how to evaluate and select health care providers or how to sort through information about alternative medicine.

Once you understand these categories of health information and what your goals should be, you are ready to get involved in your local media. One good way to begin is to volunteer your services

to local publishers and station managers as an expert on topics relevant to your experience in the medical field, such as pharmaceutical companies' direct-to-consumer advertising. Another

good way to network is to get to know the medical reporters at your local newspaper or television stations. When they approach you for a story, try to be accessible. Finally, if you are affiliated with a hospital, its public relations staff would probably be willing to connect you with their frequent contacts in the local media.

If you have medical information you strongly feel should be covered, try to embed it in a newsworthy format that would appeal to the public. For example, the issue of antibiotic resistance could be addressed in the context of recently published studies, one that reports a link between high antibiotic use and breast cancer and one that recommends a more conservative approach to the use of antibiotics for otitis media in children. This approach may be of greater interest to the media than your addressing the issue of antibiotic resistance alone. When you watch tele-

vision, try to think how important medical issues and information could be worked into the plots of local and national programs. Try to use radio talk shows, local television panel discussions, newspaper letters to the editor and other media to help carry your message.

Stick to the point

The wants and needs of the media are very straightforward. They want an interviewee who is knowledgeable about the topic, easy to understand and comfortable talking in front

of a camera, if that is the format being used. Here are some tips to consider for imparting a clear and informative message:

• **Engage your audience.** You must be able to make a medical topic interesting and package

the material so that it's useful. Any information you relate must have broad appeal.

• **Remember that you are the "expert."**

The language you use, regardless of the medium, must be understandable to the lay public. Using highly technical terms or complex explanations will diminish your ability to make your point and your utility as a medical spokesperson. You must be completely honest about the topic, and never comment on any issue without knowing all the facts.

• **Stay focused.** Keep your message straightforward and limited to a few key points. Know what you want your listeners or readers to take away from your discussion, and stay on topic.

• **Use visual aids when appropriate.** If your interview will be televised, bring anatomic models, examples of medical devices or displays of medications to help you underscore what you are saying.

• **Follow the reporter's lead.** If you are interviewed on the radio or television, a good reporter will guide you through a live interview. He or she will provide you with an opening, give you cues for a good middle and set you up for a strong closing statement that will be of immediate use to your audience.

One of the challenges of working with the media is that time is a limited commodity. Should you have the opportunity for live radio or television access, recognize that you will often have less than a minute to get your point across. In fact, interviewees should

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KEY POINTS

- Working with the media can help you educate your patients and those in the community about various topics in health care.
- To maximize your effectiveness, decide what issues are important to you and relevant to your target audience.
- The media appreciate sources who are knowledgeable, prepared and able to make their points interesting and understandable to the public.



Family physicians can deliver health information to a wide audience by using the media.



New medications on the market and other current "hot topics" in medical news present the most opportunities for media comment.



To get involved with your local media, get to know the reporters at newspapers and television stations.



When sharing your expertise with the media, make your topic interesting, stay focused and use understandable language so that your message will be clear to your audience.



Because of time limits for interviews and word limits for written materials, the media will often require you to restrict your message to the most important points.



When preparing for a television interview, send your material to the reporter ahead of time and practice your responses at home in front of a video camera.

expect that only one or two sentences will be quoted. Some interviews on public television and radio may be longer, but it's essential to learn how to say exactly what you want as succinctly as possible. Written materials are often best kept to under 1,000 words.

You must be cognizant of media deadlines. Often these deadlines are set by broadcast or publication needs and not within the control of the reporter you're working with. If you receive a media call, ask for the deadline. If you cannot meet it, say so. Don't leave the reporter waiting. Failing to meet your commitment decreases the chances of your being called again.


Practice makes perfect

Should you be asked for a television interview, prepare well in advance, especially if you are new to the process. If you have selected the topic, prepare clear talking points for yourself and send them to your reporter ahead of time. This will give a good reporter time to prepare to work with you, and it will give the station time to assemble footage or commentary to support your story. The degree to which you

prepare will increase your comfort level and your ability to respond to the reporter's questions with confidence.

Practice what you will say and, if possible, use a home video camera. Sit up straight and dress professionally with an emphasis on solid colors as opposed to complex patterns. If you work for a hospital or medical school that has a public relations staff, coordinate your efforts with them and seek their feedback on what you are planning to say. They may be very receptive to working with you, as your contact with the media will likely benefit their organization.

A healthy community service

By providing reliable, truthful, accessible and relevant information to a broad audience, you can help improve the health of your patients as well as your community. You might gain a few new patients in the process, but for the most part, your rewards won't be monetary. Rather, you'll be contributing to the greater good through unselfish service. 

Send comments to fpmedit@aafp.org.