

Can you believe all you read in the newspapers? 'Hitting the Headlines' can open your eyes

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Tips on how to locate and appraise the research evidence behind news stories on health topics

Nearly every day we read about health issues in newspapers. Every week, new research is published and the most exciting appears in the press, often in banner headlines. Can we believe what we read? Does what we read make sense? Health care users may be encouraged or frightened by newspaper stories, and health professionals may share these feelings, but also be asked to give an informed view on the latest 'major breakthrough' or 'health scare'. Healthcare users and health professionals are increasingly being assisted in making sense of some health news by new Internet services that assess the evidence behind the news.

One such service is 'Hitting the Headlines'. This is a service provided through the National electronic Library for Health (NeLH) <www.nelh.nhs.uk>. It offers busy health professionals a rapid and independent analysis of the research evidence behind selected news reports. Staff at the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (CRD) have been contracted by the NeLH to locate and examine the research behind the headlines and to produce unbiased, brief and readable summaries that appraise the evidence and the newspapers' accuracy in reporting the evidence. The summaries are then posted on the NeLH Web site within 48 hours of publication of the news story.

CRD is contracted to produce between one and two summaries each week. Stories that receive summaries must report research involving a health intervention or diagnostic test and have been reported in one or more of the English weekly national newspapers. Feedback received indicates that this service is valued by health professionals and is one of the most frequently accessed sources of health information on the NeLH site.

However, there are many more health-related topics in the news that can cause anxiety to members of the general public and can lead to increased pressure for health professionals. We would like to offer here some tips and ideas on how to locate and analyse news stories and the evidence they may be quoting.

Finding the evidence

When faced with a headline such as 'Drug risks outweigh benefit', the questions for healthcare professionals will be:

- Does this drug-related story have implications for my practice?
- Will my patients want advice and answers to questions about this drug?

If the answer to either of these questions is YES, then the detective work begins. The simplest starting point is to see if the work has already been done

obtaining the publication. Remember, sometimes journals and conferences will send out press releases pre-publication and that articles may not be available immediately. This includes online versions.

However, the newspaper article may not always mention its source of information. If it isn't obvious, then some further steps will be required to track down the original research. It is best to work from the whole newspaper article and, if possible, check whether the story has been covered in more detail elsewhere, perhaps in other newspapers or in other media. British Media Online provides links to most national and regional media <www.wrx.zen.co.uk/britnews.htm> or check out BBC News Online <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/default.stm>>. Check that the newspaper is actually reporting on completed research and not just the start of a study. This should be evident from the detail

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for you. You could try checking sites that offer critiques of research behind the news stories, such as:

- Hitting the Headlines <www.nelh.nhs.uk>
- Public Health Genetics – Rapid Response <www.phgu.org.uk/about_rapid_response.html>
- Critically Appraised Topics <<http://ahsn.lhsc.on.ca/cat/>>

Sometimes a newspaper will name the publication, perhaps a journal, which has provided the information behind the story. It is then a case of

within a news report, but may be some way down in an article.

The following questions may help to focus on the best places to search:

Does it seem to be a published research paper or a conference abstract? Remember it may not have been released/published yet

- BioMed Central contains information on meetings and reports of some trials <www.biomedcentral.com>
- Many conferences have their own Web sites: medical.conferences.com

<www.medicalconferences.com> lists world-wide health conferences and has a searchable index

Are the researchers and/or their institution named? Universities and researchers are increasingly easy to track down on the Web. Useful resources include:

- Universities Worldwide
<<http://geowww.uibk.ac.at/univ/>>
- UK Map of Universities & HE Colleges <www.scit.wlv.ac.uk/ukinfo/uk.map.html>
- COS (Community of Science Inc.) Expertise database
<<http://expertise.cos.com>>

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Are the funders named?

- Funders may have their own Web site with reports around the research. Organisations are relatively easy to identify by searching Google or other search engines

Did the researcher or funder issue a press release?

- AlphaGalileo <www.alphagalileo.org> offers subscription only access to press releases for the whole of Europe.

Can't find the evidence?

Sometimes, information about the evidence is not available, in which case a search around the topic can be useful. It could be that the story is 'old news' so check the 'Hitting the Headlines' archive to see if it has been covered before

<www.nelh.nhs.uk/hth/archive.asp>.

The findings of single research studies rarely provide definitive answers to questions about treatment effectiveness, and ideally all new research should be viewed in the context of what we already know. Well-conducted systematic reviews are the best sources of evidence on what research has told us so far about treatment effects. Identifying systematic reviews on the topic of interest gives us information on the

current state of knowledge. This can provide information to place current research in context when discussing research with patients. Systematic reviews can be found in the following resources:

- DARE (Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects)
<www.york.ac.uk/inst/crd/crddatabases.htm>
- Cochrane Library
<www.nelh.nhs.uk/cochrane.asp>

If it is difficult to identify systematic reviews easily, CRD provides an information and enquiry service to help answer specific questions about the

systematic reviews and this is available free of charge to NHS staff and researchers (E-mail: crd-info@york.ac.uk or telephone 01904 433 707; 9am to 5.15pm Monday to Friday).

Beyond systematic reviews, national and international guidelines may also be helpful in offering evidence-based context to stories based on a single research study. The NeLH <www.nelh.nhs.uk> provides access to over 70 electronic resources including NICE guidance, practice guidelines, critically appraised studies and bibliographic databases.

Appraising the research

Bearing in mind that publication, even in a reputable journal, does not guarantee the quality of a research article, any research that is identified will need to be read critically. Gaining a sense of whether the research was well conducted and whether its results are reliable can be made easier by using one of the many available critical appraisal checklists. A list of some key checklist resources can be found at <www.nelh.nhs.uk/hth/help4.asp>.

Further help

Librarians and information professionals can also be of great assist-

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ance in identifying original research, and in assisting with the detective work involved in this area. Many librarians in England and Wales are being trained in the approaches used to produce 'Hitting the Headlines'. In addition, librarians can make use of 'Hitting the Headlines' support materials being produced by NeLH, and anyone can make use of the 'Hitting the Headlines' help pages, <www.nelh.nhs.uk/hth/help.asp> which give more detail about processes and resources.