

# NewsPro

The Magazine for News Professionals

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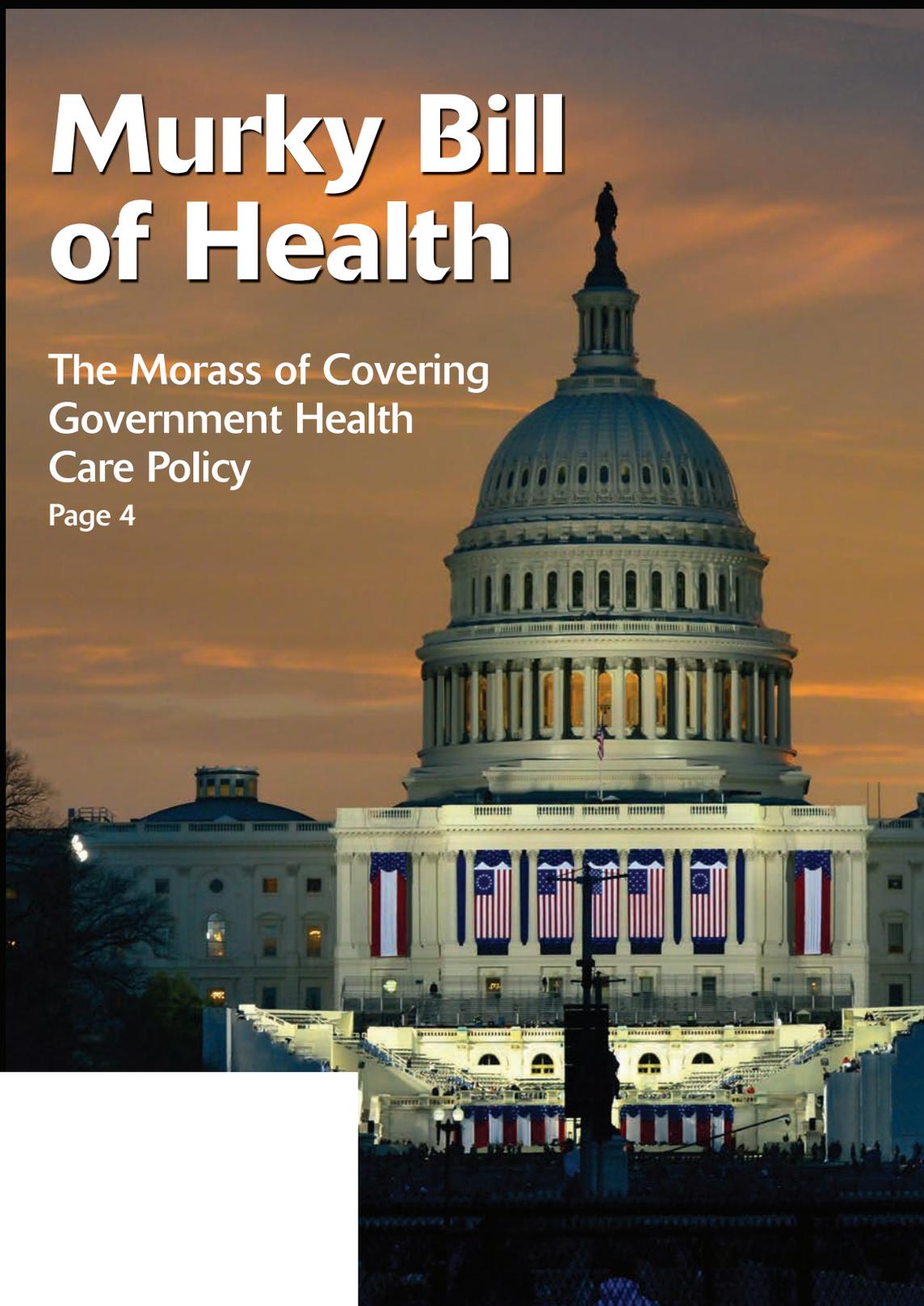
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# Feeding the Watchdog

## HealthNewsReview Has a Voracious Appetite for Analyses

By Gary Schwitzer

**H**ealthNewsReview.org is the world's most active health journalism watchdog.

That's no idle claim. You won't find another project anywhere that has systematically analyzed and graded health care news coverage for 11 years as we have.

In that time, we at HealthNewsReview have published 5,200 reviews or commentaries on health care journalism, PR, marketing and advertising.

But journalists and other writers are not our only audience. Our project aims to improve the public dialogue about health care and is the only such project that tries to help patients and consumers improve their own critical thinking about health care claims.

We un-spin. We de-bunk. We hunt down hype. We deflate fluff.

A typical day for us is to peruse and find stories that amaze us because of the analysis, context and depth of exploration. Examples include ProPublica's data dives, STAT's energetic and voluminous coverage, Kaiser Health News' policy questions and clarifications, and



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the creative voices at Vox.com — among others on a list that could be much longer. But, typically, we are also amazed at the repetition of flawed, fawning health care stories that we see every single day.

On this particular day, because I'm writing this piece, I stop for a moment and reflect on these items being reported by leading news organizations:

“Your Guide to Protein Powder: Lose Weight, Build Muscle, Age Better”

“The Sound of ‘Pink Noise’ Improves Sleep and Memory”

“Cheese is so addictive, one doctor calls it ‘dairy crack’”

“Yoga: A Surprising Solution to Your Political Stress”

“A pneumonia-diagnosing jacket can help save lives in a matter of minutes”

“Pokémon Go Makes People Walk 2,000 More Steps”

“Blood Test Might Someday Distinguish Early Depression, Schizophrenia”

“Does eating alone help you diet?”

Truly a random sample from a random day, but representative of what we see most days. Preliminary research. Poor quality-of-evidence. Small study samples. Single-source stories quoting people with a vested interest in making findings look important. Sensational. Hype. But, hey, it fills the daily quota, right?

But how does this serve reader's needs?

On page 19 is a chart of our criteria — the things we believe readers/patients need answers on regarding health care interventions. The chart shows grades for the first 2,330+ news stories we've reviewed — using those criteria — and grades for the first 330 PR news releases we've reviewed. (Note that two of the criteria differ in the news story reviews from what's used for the news release reviews.)

If you're not familiar with our reviews and process, you can read more at: [healthnewsreview.org/about-us/review-criteria/](http://healthnewsreview.org/about-us/review-criteria/)

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REVIEW CRITERIA — DOES THE ARTICLE...?	% UNSATISFACTORY 330 PR NEWS RELEASES	% UNSATISFACTORY 2,330 NEWS STORIES
Adequately explain costs?	93%	69%
Provide adequate data on the scope of potential benefits?	69%	66%
Provide adequate data on the scope of potential harms?	76%	63%
Describe the quality of the evidence?	69%	61%
Compare the new approach with existing alternatives?	58%	54%
Does the release identify funding sources & disclose conflicts of interest?	53%	Does the story use independent sources & identify conflicts of interest? 46%
Establish the true availability of the intervention?	33%	26%
Establish the true novelty of the intervention?	37%	23%
Avoid disease-mongering?	13%	20%
Does the news release include unjustifiable, sensational language, including in the quotes of researchers?	33%	Does the story appear to rely solely/largely on news release? 8%*

**THIS CHART SHOWS GRADES FOR THE FIRST 2,330+ NEWS STORIES AND THE FIRST 330 PRESS RELEASES REVIEWED BY HEALTHNEWSREVIEW.**

\* ~20% of stories were graded N/A because reviewers have insufficient evidence to judge.



This is — or should be — a humbling report card for the 2,700 articles involved. More than half of all of these articles get unsatisfactory grades on the top five criteria — rising to failing grades of 60%, 70% even 93% by criterion and article type.

Because the faucet of this flow of flawed news often gets turned on by PR news releases, we have recently announced an unprecedented new service. Rather than only offer constructive criticism of news releases after they are published, we are now willing to review and comment on news releases if they are submitted to us before publication. It's a no-cost, no-obligation-to-follow-our-advice offer. We are doing it because we think the need to improve the flow of information to the public is that great.

Patients are harmed by imbalanced, incomplete news. To help editorial decision-makers understand why improvement is needed, we've begun interviewing patients in audio podcasts about how they've been harmed by misleading media messages. Or, in the case of a recent podcast with veteran health care journalist Howard Wolinsky about his prostate cancer diagnosis and treatment decision, the discussion focused on issues that are under-reported.

Other patient podcasts featured two women with breast cancer, the sister-in-law of a man who died of glioblastoma, a woman who runs a migraine patient support group and the director of a rare disease patient advocacy group. Each tells a story of harm caused by some form of misleading media message. These are stories that journalists and PR news release writers may rarely, if ever, hear as they write stories that tend to feature glowing success stories.

The feedback we have received from journalists and PR professionals about our reviews has been overwhelmingly positive. A sampling of what we've heard:

- Journalist at Top 3 newspaper: "It's good to have critical eyes looking over these stories. Overall I think your evaluation was fair enough."
- Journalist at Top 10 newspaper: "I agree with all the good things

(and the few negative ones). Points well made, and taken."

- Journalist at Top 10 newspaper: "What a great resource! Thank you for the feedback. You're right that deadlines and the pace of digital reporting definitely influence how stories come out. But I will definitely bear this in mind for future stories."
- PR professional for medical foundation: "It was definitely beneficial to have the feedback."
- PR professional for university: "I think your comments were fair. I am pleased that you recognized the caution in the release — something I take particularly seriously as we regularly get patients and their families contacting us off the back of our press releases and the last thing we want is to unnecessarily raise expectations. Yours is a useful reminder about how to communicate research responsibly."
- PR professional from a research institute: "Your review was not entirely unexpected. 'Pressures and demands in health care communications'... indeed."
- PR professional at academic medical center: "While I do not agree with all of your assessments, I think overall you provided a very fair and thoughtful review of our release. In fact, I have shared the review with our entire media team as a learning tool."

In summary, HealthNewsReview.org continues to try new ways of reaching and helping more journalists and PR professionals. It is gratifying to know that we are influencing more writers to think about ways to improve their work, and to improve the public dialogue about health care. ■

*Gary Schwitzer is the founder and publisher of HealthNewsReview.org and an adjunct associate professor in the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. In 2014, the American Medical Writers Association honored him "for preeminent contributions to medical communication."*