



FEATURE

Health news watchdog

THE U'S GARY SCHWITZER IS ON A MISSION TO
KEEP MEDICAL REPORTING HONEST

BY CARMEN PEOTA



Gary Schwitzer launched HealthNewsReview.org in 2006 to help the public separate fact from fiction when reading about medical breakthroughs.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK LUINENBURG

In March, a blog post appeared on HealthNewsReview.org announcing free help for writers of press releases.

To PR professionals who'd received a one-star (out of five) rating from the

site, which reviews news reports and press releases about health and medicine, the announcement was likely greeted with relief. Not only can they now get a second opinion on their work, but they also can avoid an online upbraiding.

Critiquing press releases is a new twist for HealthNewsReview.org, now housed within the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health. For more than a decade, its founder, Gary Schwitzer, has earned a reputation for pointing out the hype, inaccuracies, and omissions in medical news stories. But it's a logical next step.

Launched in 2006, HealthNewsReview.org seeks to help reporters do a better job. And as Schwitzer knows from his years as a journalist, the press release is often part of the problem when health news comes up short.

Cutting through the hype

Schwitzer realized how flawed most medical reporting was in the 1980s. He had taken a job at CNN, thinking he'd have the opportunity to do in-depth, analytical stories that provided context and explanation. Instead, he felt pressured to deliver short, sensational pieces—and lots of them—to fill the network's 24/7 coverage. "It was a classic feed-the-beast mentality," he says.

WHEN READING ABOUT A MEDICAL STUDY OR DISCOVERY...

- Look for absolute versus relative differences. A drug may reduce risk by 50 percent (relative risk

Disgruntled, he took a job at Dartmouth making videos to help patients understand the risks and benefits of treatments. He left in 1999 for Mayo Clinic, then joined the U's journalism department two years later.

The head of the Dartmouth-based Foundation for Informed Medical Decision Making tracked him down in Minnesota and asked if they could “do something together.” Schwitzer already had an idea about what that something could be. He had stumbled onto an Australian website called MediaDoctor.org that published reviews of news stories about health, and he wanted to bring the concept to the United States.

With funding from the foundation, office space from his department, and the help of a few graduate students, HealthNewsReview.org began to take shape. Schwitzer's team would review news stories with claims about the efficacy of treatments, tests, products, and procedures, based on 10 criteria, including whether the stories mentioned cost and harms as well as benefits.

For five years, Schwitzer worked at the project, while keeping up with his committee, research, and teaching

reduction) but it's only an absolute difference of 1 percent if the risk went from 2 percent in people who were untreated to 1 percent in those treated.

- Recognize the difference between causation and association. A study might show a relationship between X and Y. But that doesn't mean X causes Y.
- Be concerned if the story relied on a single source or a press release.
- Expect information about potential harms as well as benefits.
- Beware that a compelling anecdote can overshadow critical details such as the number of people who dropped out of a study or who were dissatisfied with a treatment.

load. In 2010, he took a sabbatical to concentrate on the site full-time. But even that wasn't enough. Knowing he could no longer be both professor and publisher, he resigned his tenured faculty position.

Turn of events

Shortly after HealthNewsReview.org moved out of Murphy Hall (home of the U's journalism program), it lost the foundation dollars it had relied on for more than eight years. Schwitzer scrambled to keep it afloat. "It went 19 months without any support," he says.

Then in 2013, almost ready to "hang it up," Schwitzer traveled to Australia to speak at a conference. While on the flight, he read about the Laura and John Arnold Foundation. Maybe they'd fund him, he thought.

Schwitzer didn't have the opportunity to act on that thought. Upon landing in Los Angeles for a connecting flight, he checked his email and discovered a message from one of the foundation's vice presidents asking what he would do if he got funding.

Schwitzer began working on a proposal. In order to receive a grant, however, HealthNewsReview.org needed to be part of a tax-exempt organization. Schwitzer talked with John Finnegan Jr., dean of the School of Public Health, with whom he had launched a health journalism

program years earlier. “He didn’t hesitate,” Schwitzer says. “He cut me off and said, ‘This is perfectly in line with our mission. Go for it.’”

The proposal was funded—receiving \$1.3 million for two years—and HealthNewsReview.org moved back home to the University. It has since received a second, larger grant from the Arnold Foundation as well as support from other private donors.

Looking ahead

The gift was a turning point for the organization that until then had “run on the passion” of its founder, as Finnegan puts it. Now with five full-time staff and a network of 50 contributors across the country, it’s expanding into new areas such as podcasts and the reviewing of press releases.

The Arnold Foundation support has enabled Schwitzer, who for many years “touched” every review himself, to instead serve as ambassador for HealthNewsReview.org. As such, he’s spending his time talking about the impact of the organization he’s built (he says journalists and others regularly write saying they value the reviews) and why flooding the public with stories that make medical treatments look “terrific, risk free, and without a price tag” matters.

He thinks shoddy journalism is in part responsible for the huge amount the nation spends on health care, as people make decisions based on what they read and hear. “Journalism isn’t the primary

target of our work,” Schwitzer says. “In the end, we’re trying to help the public improve their critical thinking about health care.”

Carmen Peota is a Minneapolis writer.

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