



Getting Journalists up to Speed on Health and Health Care Issues

Improving the quality, accuracy and relevance of coverage using online professional development tools for journalists

SUMMARY

From 2005 to 2011, [The Center for Excellence in Health Care Journalism](#) designed, developed and maintained a new [website](#) with extensive resources to enhance the ability of journalists to cover health care issues. The website was launched in June 2007, following two years of preparation.

The center aims to improve the quality, accuracy and visibility of health care reporting. It is an affiliate of the Association of Health Care Journalists, a professional trade organization. Both are based at the University of Missouri, in Columbia, Mo.

Key Results

- The [website](#) launched by the center in 2007 averaged 14,000 site visits a month as of July 2011. Resources available to members of the Association of Health Care Journalists include “Slim Guides” to inform reporters about topics such as how to use medical research, articles and tip sheets, audio and PowerPoint® presentations from conferences, and a story archive.
- Center resources available to the public include a weekly electronic newsletter, a daily blog and social media, including Facebook and Twitter.
- Membership in the association increased by 33 percent over five years, reaching 1,158 members in July 2011, which the project director believes is at least partially related to the resources available on the members-only portion of the website.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) supported this project from April 2005 to March 2011 with two grants totaling \$457,454.

CONTEXT

Americans rely heavily on the media for information about health-related issues. For example:

- Some 58 percent of Americans say that a medical or health news story influenced them to change health habits or to seek medical treatment, according to a 1997 National Health Council Survey.
- In a January 2000 poll by the American Dietetic Association, 48 percent of respondents cited television as a leading source of nutrition information, 47 percent cited magazines and 18 percent cited newspapers.

Responding to this interest, journalists are under growing pressure to produce more health stories, more quickly, yet they receive little training on the subjects they cover. Without adequate background or context, they are more likely to make errors and less likely to properly report on complex health issues.

All of this is complicated by the shrinking journalistic economy, which gives few reporters the luxury of specializing solely in health. At the same time, they face an increasing amount of material supplied by advocacy organizations but passed off as news.

"Journalism historically has been slow to invest in training and getting newsrooms to invest in training is even tougher now," says Leonard J. Bruzzese, executive director of the center and the project director. "As a group, we have to be more creative in how we assist professionals."

RWJF's Interest in This Area

RWJF has long been interested in improving the quality and frequency of health and health care media coverage, and has worked extensively with the association since its inception in 1997.

Prior RWJF grants supported:

- Strategic planning, membership recruitment and an inaugural conference (1999-2000). See [Program Results Report](#) for grant ID# 36429.
- Publication of *Covering the Quality of Health Care: A Resource Guide for Journalists* (2002), available for a fee. See [Program Results Report](#) for grant ID# 41411.
- The fifth national conference, held in Minneapolis and designed to improve reporters' knowledge of health care issues (2004). See [Program Results Report](#) for grant ID# 50493.

- Annual conferences, special topics workshops, an ethnic media initiative and core funding to the Missouri School of Journalism, where the center is based (2007–2011, grant ID# 62610).

THE PROJECT

From 2005 to 2011, the Center for Excellence in Health Care Journalism designed, developed and maintained a new website with members of the Association of Health Care Journalists. Resources included guides to covering health care issues, tip sheets, multimedia material and details on how award-winning stories were reported. Additional resources were available to the general public.

Prior to the website launch, center staff surveyed association members and traded ideas with other journalists and their organizations. The online survey revealed that members found it challenging to find trustworthy background information and stay on top of health care trends. They wanted:

- Interactive feedback through listservs
- Tip sheets on covering specific health topics
- A guide to health websites

RESULTS

Center staff reported the following results, as of July 2011:

- **The center launched a new website on June 1, 2007.** As of July 2011, the site averaged 14,000 visits and 35,000 page views a month. Resources are designed to be easily accessible, with the use of drop-down topic menus that include avian flu, Medicare, mental health, diabetes, genetics and others. A special section focuses on freelancers.

Key features of the site, available only to association members, include:

- “Slim Guides” for reporters about using medical research, navigating the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reporting on nursing homes and obesity, and more
- Articles and tip sheets, including pieces written specifically for the site. Topics have included mental health and the military; sports injuries in school-age children; using the National Library of Medicine databases; and domestic violence and health care.
- Audio presentations and PowerPoint slides from Association of Health Care Journalists’ conferences and workshops on subjects ranging from brain injury to conflicts of interest to using multimedia tools in health reporting

- A story archive, drawn from submissions to the association’s annual contest, Excellence in Health Care Journalism, including information on how the reporter got the story. For example:
 - A CBS News profile of a New Orleans grandmother with advanced Alzheimer's, her 50-year-old daughter with early onset, and her 30-year-old granddaughter, who is about to become pregnant and is haunted by the dilemma of whether or not to have a genetic test for Alzheimer’s.
 - "Suddenly Sick," a *Seattle Times* investigation of five "diseases" that shows how the drug industry influences what is considered a disease and who has it.
- Special event coverage, including live updates from the association’s annual health journalism conferences. The site also carried coverage from an International AIDS Society Conference, allowing members to track breaking stories.
- **Additional electronic resources are available both to association members and to the public.** As of July 2011, these include:
 - A weekly electronic newsletter, with some 2,000 subscribers
 - A blog, [Covering Health](#), which has some 11,000 monthly visits
 - A significant presence on social media. The association’s Facebook page has 836 regular users and more than 4,100 people are signed up for Twitter feeds, which provide story tips, updates about blog postings and links to health stories on the Web. A LinkedIn group has 200 members.
- **As of July 2011, the association had 1,158 members, a 33 percent increase over five years.** The project director believes the growth is at least partially related to the expanded availability of member-only resources on the Web.

AFTERWARD

The center continues to maintain the website and enrich the available resources.

In order to provide a “launch pad” for reporters embarking on a story, the center has begun covering core health-related topics over time. A “topic champion”—a freelance writer under contract—follows developments and posts them on the website, leads member discussions and hires other freelance writers as needed to cover the topic. Additional material is available for more sophisticated reporters.

A three-year grant from RWJF that began in January 2011 (ID# 68601) allows the center to focus on health care reform as one its core topics. Additional funds from the Commonwealth Fund and the John A. Hartford Foundation are supporting aging and long-term care, as a core topic.

The center is seeking additional foundation support for other topics it considers crucial to a health journalist's development, including hospitals, health professionals, health information technology, health insurance, prescription drugs and social determinants/health disparities.

A three-year grant from the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust includes funds to keep the website updated.

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Grantee Website

www.healthjournalism.org. Grantee website. A blog and material on developments in health care and health care journalism are available to the general public. Columbia, MO. Center for Excellence in Health Care Journalism.