

Asked what seemed to be the problem, the well-dressed businessman handed over the electrocardiogram he'd done at home that morning saying "Well doctor, I'm just a little concerned about the ST elevation on my chest leads."

Not every patient turns up with his own ECG, but more and more are coming well briefed about their disease, even before it has been diagnosed. Some come with a list of such technical questions that they can only be dealt with by a bit of frantic googling while the patient is sent off to provide a urine sample.

The *Hong Kong Medical Journal* must plead guilty to charges of contributing to the phenomenon. Our original articles and case histories are increasingly being reported in both the Hong Kong and international media.

Thanks to reports published in the Hong Kong press, followed up by the international media, the world now knows that mahjong can trigger epilepsy in susceptible individuals, that street ketamine use can lead to bladder dysfunction and that mainland mothers presenting in labour without prior antenatal care in Hong Kong hospitals have higher rates of stillbirth.

To try to gauge what interests the Hong Kong media—and by default, the public—we did a review of news stories based on reports in the HKMJ published in 2007/2008. What were the 'hot topics'? Apart from the three issues mentioned above, the subjects that attracted most attention were: melamine contamination, weight control, breast screening, problems with slimming products and allergic rhinitis.

We found quite a gap between what the HKMJ chooses to highlight as 'issue digests' and what the media select as interesting stories. To find out why, we asked a group of medical writers from Hong Kong's major English and Chinese language publications what kind of stories they are interested in and whether HKMJ, the health system, and the medical profession serve them well.

The group ranged considerably in age (23-40, most were in their late twenties) and experience, and females outnumbered males 2.5 to 1. Contrary to complaints that newspapers 'send reporters who are so green' many had significant experience on the medical round. One had been on the medical beat for more than ten years. Few had actually aspired to be medical writers—most had simply been assigned to the medical round—but the consensus was that once they began to write medical news they found the work fulfilling because their reporting had such an impact on people's lives.

Asked "what do you consider the 'hot' medical topics right now", the answers were not surprising: most nominated pharmacy problems and medical



negligence. But there were a few surprises when it came to what they said readers are interested in, and what editors dictate should be covered.

Readers are interested in stories affecting their daily lives, medical policy, new treatments, fitness and beauty, so may not always be wanting to read the 'sensational stories' that editors demand their reporters chase. One reporter said she wanted to write about tuberculosis because it was still an important disease affecting a lot of readers but her editor said "there's nothing new about TB!"

The reporters themselves said they enjoyed writing about new treatments, new diseases, policy and medical mismanagement.

Regardless of the subject, medical news quality is most strongly affected by the quality and availability of information, especially that from medical sources. For this reason we asked who in the Hong Kong medical scene is a 'good media performer' (and why) and who 'could do with a bit of media training'.

The good news is that the 'good performers' list was long. Those nominated got their star-ratings for being accessible (he/she 'always gets back to you quickly', 'you can find him even at 11 pm'), to the point, able to explain things clearly, able and willing to provide accurate and recent data to support their points, unafraid to 'say what he means' and simply 'inspirational'.

The list of poor performers, some may be surprised to learn, was much shorter. Poor performers were nominated for being evasive, not answering the question, having no hard data, being difficult to understand, being contemptuous of the media, not returning calls and not responding to requests for information.

The accuracy of any news story depends on verifying facts with more than one source. As one reporter put it: "It's not the reporter who wants to ring late at night, it's the editor who wants to make sure the facts are right."

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