

Too much unhealthy media coverage of medical tests

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A large global study published today in the leading US medical journal *JAMA Internal Medicine* finds the media is often failing to cover the potential harms of new medical tests which are designed to detect the early signs of disease in healthy people.

The study also found media stories often fail to report on conflicts of interest of researchers promoting the new tests.

Researchers from the University of Sydney and Bond University analyzed over 1100 recent news stories about five new early detection tests including:

- Liquid blood biopsies to detect cancers
- Apple Watch to detect Atrial Fibrillation
- Blood tests for dementia
- Artificial Intelligence tests for dementia
- 3D mammography for breast [cancer](#)

Failure to cover important potential harms

While almost all the 1173 analyzed stories reported

on the potential benefits of these tests, over 60% of stories failed to make mention of any potential harms.

One [story](#) claimed: "A simple blood [test](#) can now detect dementia decades before any symptoms appear..." and advocated using the test during routine health checks.

Another story provided unbalanced coverage of a new test for multiple cancers: "Dubbed the 'holy grail' for cancer care, liquid biopsy could significantly shorten diagnosis time (and) find very early-stage cancer in those with no symptoms."

"For all five of the tests covered in our *JAMA Internal Medicine* study, there is concern that some of the healthy people tested will be wrongly classified as sick," says Dr. Ray Moynihan, Assistant Professor at Bond University and senior author on the study. "Yet this potential harm of overdiagnosis was only mentioned in 5% of stories."

Lead author, Dr. Mary O'Keeffe from the University of Sydney, said: "While these tests sound appealing, and can bring benefits, whenever we test healthy people there's a danger that some people will be wrongly classified as sick. This can cause overdiagnosis and overtreatment."

Overdiagnosis occurs when people receive a diagnosis of a disease or condition that will never develop to cause any symptoms or early death. It is an unnecessary diagnosis that does more harm than good. Evidence published last year in the *Medical Journal of Australia* shows that for common cancers, around one in five cancers may be overdiagnosed.

Failure to cover important conflicts of interest

Another key finding from the study is the widespread failure of media stories to cover

important conflicts of interest, such as commentators receiving payments from the companies marketing the new tests. For example, 19 of 22 authors of a key trial examining the ability of the Apple Watch to detect atrial fibrillation disclosed taking grants or personal fees from Apple, yet this information was rarely reported in news stories.

While over half the 1173 stories in the study included the views of commentators with important financial conflicts of interest, these conflicts were only covered in 12% of stories.

Strategies to improve media coverage needed

The paper concludes: "Strategies to improve media reporting so that professionals, patients and the public receive more balanced information about early detection tests are urgently needed."

"Higher quality medical reporting is more complete medical reporting—covering benefits, harms, and conflicts of interest," says Dr. Moynihan, who is working with Dr. O'Keeffe and colleagues on a pilot study of new training interventions for journalists.

More information: Mary O'Keeffe et al. Global Media Coverage of the Benefits and Harms of Early Detection Tests, *JAMA Internal Medicine* (2021).
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