

## EDITORIAL

## Writing a Press Release

After publication of a particularly interesting or significant scientific work, some journals circulate a press release to the media. This is a short, readily understandable written statement, the purpose of which is to attract notice by the general public. Alternatively, journalists may ask authors of key articles for a statement that will help them spread the message to a wider audience beyond professional physicians and scientists. Neither the authors nor journals should distribute unpublished reports until the journal's media embargo has expired.<sup>1</sup>

Local media, seeking sensationalism, sometimes exaggerate the importance of certain scientific reports. This is not beneficial for either the authors or the journal. To avoid misunderstandings, it is best to have the author write a press release and allow the medical journal to release it.

BMJ recently published a retrospective cohort study on medical journal press releases and associated news stories.<sup>2</sup> Going backwards from January 2009, the authors of this study reviewed five major medical journals, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, *BMJ*, *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, *JAMA*, and *New England Journal of Medicine* to identify the first 100 original research articles with quantifiable outcomes that had generated newspaper coverage. They identified 759 associated newspaper stories, and 68 journal press releases and concluded that high quality press releases issued by medical journals could make the quality of associated newspaper stories better, whereas low quality press releases would likely make them worse.

A good press release includes a brief and clear headline. The body of the text should be short and to the point. A text of between 150 and 250 words should be sufficient to convey the main message. The sentences should be short, and the terms used understandable to lay people. Obscure terminology should be avoided whenever possible, and technical words and abbreviations should be explained when first used. For lay readers and listeners, approximations are preferable to percentages when reporting data. For example, 8 percent becomes "nearly one in ten", and 57 percent becomes "more than half." The press release should contain the name, address, telephone, and e-address of the senior author, but if there are multiple authors, one could be selected to talk to the media.

The writer of a good press release should direct his attention to his audience, which consists of journalists and people looking for health-related information. A journalist's primary goal is to provide correct information to his readers. A precisely worded and easily understandable press release is the way to avoid sensationalism and wrong information.

Rajko Igić

## References

1. Igić R. Publication in peer-reviewed medical journals. *J BUON* 2006;11:405-10.
2. Schwartz LM, Woloshin S, Andrews A, Stukel TA. Influence of medical journal press releases on the quality of associated newspaper coverage: retrospective cohort study. *BMJ*. 2012;344:d8164. doi: 10.1136/bmj.d8164.