

Medicine in the Media:

The Challenge of Reporting on Medical Research

Bethesda, Maryland
April 12-14, 2007



Agenda*

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 11

6:00–9:00 p.m. **Welcome Reception**—Patio/gazebo behind the Pony Express

THURSDAY, APRIL 12

7:30–8:00 a.m. **Breakfast**—Osgood’s Dining Room
Please note that Osgood’s opens at 6:00 a.m. for early risers.

8:00–8:30 a.m. **Hosts’ Opening Remarks**
Barry Kramer, Director, NIH Office of Medical Applications of Research
Joe Francis, Department of Veterans Affairs

8:30–9:00 a.m. **Orientation and a big picture look at medicine in the media**
This session will review the goals of the course, outline some common problems researchers see when they read stories about health in the media, and discuss ways to do better. **Steven Woloshin**

9:00–10:00 a.m. **How big? Numbers in research**
A major challenge for health journalists is understanding how big the main effect is in a given study. This session describes how health outcomes are counted and compared. The session will also provide a quick review of some basic terms used in health research and statistics.
Gil Welch

10:00–10:15 a.m. **Break**

10:15 a.m.–
12:30 p.m. **How sure? Basic research designs**
No matter how big the numbers are, you still need to decide whether to believe them. Perhaps the most basic question to ask is whether the numbers came from a true experiment. This session focuses on the basic distinction between randomized trials and observational studies.
Gil Welch

12:30–1:30 p.m. **Lunch**—Osgood’s Dining Room

**as of 4/9/2007—please note that the agenda is subject to change
All sessions take place in Room 17A/B in the North Building unless otherwise stated.*

THURSDAY, APRIL 12 (CONTINUED)

- 1:30–2:45 p.m. Using what you learned: Problems with numbers and some solutions**
Understanding the numbers is one thing, but communicating them to your readers is another. This example-based, interactive session will highlight how numbers can be misleading (or just confusing) and offer practical guidance on how to report them clearly. **Steven Woloshin**
- 2:45–4:00 p.m. Using what you learned: Highlighting cautions about observational studies**
Because some exposures are harmful, much research cannot involve randomized trials and must be done with observational studies. A major problem with observational studies is that it is hard to know the true cause of the observed difference. This session will deal with the problem of confounding and how researchers typically deal with it. Craig Stoltz, former health section editor of the Washington Post, and current Editorial Director for Revolution Health, will show how reporters can deal with these issues by modeling a lead paragraph that appropriately reflects the caution needed in reporting on observational studies. **Lisa Schwartz & Craig Stoltz**
- 4:00–5:00 p.m. Break**
Enjoy the leisure activities of the Bolger Center—swimming, biking, tennis, etc.
- 5:00–6:00 p.m. Special Guest: Barron H. Lerner—Stained Glass Hall**
Author of *When Illness Goes Public: Celebrity Patients and How We Look at Medicine*
- 6:00–9:00 p.m. Dinner & Panel Discussion—Stained Glass Hall**
- 7:15–9:00 p.m. Inside Washington: The intersection of policymaking and clinical research**
An FDA official and a member of the IOM panel that prepared the recent report, *The Future of Drug Safety: Protecting and Promoting the Health of the Public*, will discuss its key findings and potential implications.
Bruce Psaty & Paul Seligman

FRIDAY, APRIL 13

7:30–8:00 a.m.	Breakfast —Osgood’s Dining Room <i>Please note that Osgood’s opens at 6:00 a.m. for early risers. To maximize our time downtown, please bring cameras, etc. to the classroom and be ready to leave promptly at 1:30 p.m.</i>
8:00–9:00 a.m.	How sure? The limited role of statistics P values and 95% confidence intervals can be intimidating, but these are the basic measures that researchers use to express the role of chance and the precision of their findings. Being comfortable with these statistics can help journalists judge for themselves the value of study findings. In this session, these concepts will be explained clearly and concisely. <i>Gil Welch</i>
9:00–10:15 a.m.	Using what you learned: More cautions (even for randomized trials) Even with the best study designs, you need to understand basic study elements: who was in the study and what was measured. This session deals with the problems that arise when describing unfamiliar outcomes like "scores" in distinguishing clinical and statistical significance, and when results are in the "gray zone." <i>Lisa Schwartz & Steven Woloshin</i>
10:15–10:30 a.m.	Break
10:30–11:30 a.m.	Special Topic: Disease mongering I Healthcare providers and the public are under increasing pressure to accept expanded definitions of what constitutes disease. When this pressure does not serve patients’ interests, it has been labeled disease mongering. The primary interest served is the financial well-being of pharmaceutical and device manufacturers who stand to gain from expanded markets. In this session, we review the case of “restless legs syndrome” to explore how the media can unwittingly facilitate this process. <i>Steven Woloshin & Lisa Schwartz</i>
11:30–12:30 p.m.	Special Topic: Disease mongering II Susan Kelleher will report on her series, Suddenly Sick, an investigative series about disease mongering that she wrote for the Seattle Times last year. In the series Kelleher explores how subtle changes in disease definitions, entanglement between PhRMA, researchers, policy makers and practitioners conspire to make everyone sick. <i>Susan Kelleher</i>
12:30–1:30 p.m.	Lunch —Osgood’s Dining Room
1:30–7:00 p.m.	Out & About: Visit to the NIH and the National Mall
7:00–9:00 p.m.	Dinner & Discussion —Stained Glass Hall
7:45–9:00 p.m.	Panel discussion: Getting beyond the press release du jour Each year journalists tell us they often feel like they are in a rut: just summarizing the big studies out of the NEJM, JAMA or the other big journals each week. They say it creates two problems: it’s hard to bring a fresh voice to these stories, and they miss out on tackling big picture issues (like the Suddenly Sick series). In this session, Susan Kelleher will tell the story behind her investigative series (e.g., how she negotiated with her editors for time and space). We will then brainstorm with two seasoned health section editors to learn their advice on how to negotiate with editors when you are trying to get out of the rut. <i>Craig Stoltz, Susan Kelleher & Gideon Gil</i>

SATURDAY, APRIL 14

7:30–8:15 a.m.	Breakfast/Room check-out/Travel arrangements/Tutorial <i>Please note that Osgood's doesn't open until 7:30 a.m. on Saturdays.</i>
8:15–9:15 a.m.	From whence and wherefore? The evolution of clinical guidelines A look at how various programs that evaluate evidence—National Institutes of Health Consensus Development Program, USPSTF, PDQ, Cochrane Collaboration, professional societies, IOM, and others—do what they do, and why you should care. Jennifer Miller & Barry Kramer
9:15–10:45 a.m.	Too big? Two numbers to handle with care Journalists are frequently presented with two numbers that are prone to misinterpretations. One type is deceptively simple—5-year (and 10-year) survival. The other sounds hard (and is): odds ratios. This session will provide guidance on how to understand these numbers. Gil Welch & Steven Woloshin
10:45–11:00 a.m.	Break
11:00–12:30 p.m.	Special Topic: The logic of cancer screening This session provides tools for journalists to assess skeptically unqualified endorsements of cancer screening tests and to distinguish between strength of opinion and strength of evidence. Barry Kramer
12:30–1:30 p.m.	Lunch—Osgood's Dining Room
1:30–2:30 p.m.	Using what you learned: Reporting on screening studies In this interactive session we will challenge you to use what you've learned about cancer screening to critique and improve an essay published in a major US newspaper. You will be asked to identify what is right, what is wrong and what is missing. The session will provide general guidance on how to report about research findings on cancer screening. Steven Woloshin, Lisa Schwartz & Craig Stoltz
2:30–3:45 p.m.	Garbage! When the news may not be fit to print The cautions about some study designs are formidable—so much so that journalists might reconsider covering them at all. This session will highlight stories that might have been best left on the cutting room floor—for example, preliminary results (e.g., scientific meetings, animal studies), uncontrolled studies, and cost-effectiveness models. Steven Woloshin, Lisa Schwartz & Gil Welch
3:45–4:00 p.m.	Closing Comments Barry Kramer