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New Europe-wide bid to raise standards in health reporting

Health and health care are seldom out of the news in any country, whether it be magazines, newspapers, websites or the broadcast media: but how reliable is the coverage, and how much important information never makes it into the headlines?

These are among the issues to be tackled by a bold new EU-funded initiative which brings together health professionals, health journalists and academics from seven countries to analyse the level of training of today's health journalists, and find ways to improve it.

There is no doubt that health issues are newsworthy: every reader is concerned about their own health and their family, and the health care industry is by far the largest industry in the world economy, with a turnover in excess of \$5,000 billion every year and more than 60 million employees.

Health care is also a big political story: several EU countries spend in excess of 10 percent of their GDP on health care, while most are seeking to squeeze public spending as a result of the 2008 banking crash.

A number of European governments are involved in controversial "reforms" to health care systems which will increase private sector involvement and impact on patients. Many of these reforms have been poorly explained in the media and are little understood, leaving the voting public and many health professionals in the dark.

Clearly the fact that an audience wants health news has not been enough to ensure that media bosses have been willing to invest in proper training for the journalists who research and produce the news we rely upon. With few if any formal courses available, many specialist health reporters have had effectively to teach themselves: but many newsrooms are now too busy to allow new reporters to develop their own expertise.

The HeaRT (Health Reporting Training) project, initiated by the Athens-based organisation Institute of Preventive Medicine, Environmental and Occupational Health, Prolepsis brings together a combination of skills from Germany, Portugal, Romania, Great Britain, Finland and Estonia. They will work over the next two years to research the current levels of training and future training needs, before developing a short course to help fill in the gaps in specialist knowledge – to be delivered in each country in its own language.

A founding meeting in Dusseldorf in December has launched the project, which will be seeking the views of health reporters in every sector of the media in each of the EU countries.



Project director Afroditi Veloudaki, from Prolepsis, said:

“We already know we are the first project of this type, and we are very excited to be given this chance to help health journalists across Europe improve the quality of the information they can provide.”

British participant Dr John Lister, who teaches an MA in Health Journalism at Coventry University said:

“The very patchy level of reporting on important issues such as our controversial health reforms in England, or the huge, expensive public panic over swine flu early in 2010 show that we really need more depth, knowledge and balance in health reporting if the public is to be properly informed.

“The HeaRT project has a benefit for everyone – public, patients, health workers and journalists alike. It’s great to get it started.”

For more details or if you are interested to get involved and participate in the project’s activities please contact:

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