



PRESS RELEASE

Survey reveals training gaps among health journalists

The average journalist covering health issues in Europe would appear to be female, a graduate, aged 31-50, with upwards of 6 years or more reporting health – but has no specific training in health reporting, according to a unique new survey of six EU countries.

The EU co-funded HeaRT (Health Reporter Training) project conducted a snapshot survey in August and September drawing 146 responses from working journalists in the partner countries, and in particular Britain, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece and Romania, seeking to identify a profile of health journalists, their level of experience and training. At a time of change in the media, it also found that most health journalists are still employed on the staff of a publication, website or broadcaster rather than freelance.

While there were, as expected, significant variations from one country to another, one common factor was that while almost every one of the journalists (98.6%) had received higher education, a large majority (71%) of those responding had had no specialist training in reporting health stories: only in Romania did just over half (55%) report that they had received such training. A number of those claiming appropriate training had degrees in medical subjects rather than health journalism.

The overall findings tie in with earlier research by HeaRT project partners which has shown very limited educational and training resources for health journalism, with many European countries having few if any courses available.

The survey also showed that 81% of health journalists consider the coverage of health issues in the news media to be 'good' or 'fair', but only 7% thought it 'excellent'. Estonia and Finland gave more positive ratings and Romania, UK and Germany more negative. Stories which were felt to receive least coverage are global health, business/economics of health care and health disparities. Only consumer/lifestyle health stories seem to be adequately covered in all countries. On the quality of health stories, journalists felt the poorest was the coverage of health disparities, medical research and science and health care quality and performance.

Asked to identify their interests in further specialised training, the largest number opted for more information on how to report medical research and science stories, followed by the business and economics of health care, and health policy issues. Least popular topics were the workings of publicly funded healthcare and health disparities.

Among the skills health journalists were most keen to enhance, from the list of nine suggested, the most popular was how to evaluate conflicts of interest (with especially strong interest in this in



Estonia and Romania). Second preferences was how to interpret medical research reports, and third how to understand statistics.

When asked to report the most important obstacles and problems journalists encounter when reporting on a health topic, one of the points of agreement among two or more countries seems to be that few people in the health system (i.e. doctors, experts, etc.) are willing to provide information or talk to the media. Another problem is that health topics are largely influenced by companies or lobbies of the medical sector.

Time constraints, as well as the lack of statistical data and updated national statistics, the difficulties on interpreting statistics and in general the lack of medical education was also identified as obstacles by journalists of different countries. Journalists were divided over which types of training they found most interesting, with 80% expressing interest in national conferences and 81% in workshops, 77% in online reports, fact sheets and tip sheets, 73% in printed books and resource guides, while just 47% opted for online courses, 34% for podcasts and 35% for video webcasts.

The findings from this survey, together with HeaRT research on existing courses and available literature, will be used in the next few months to draw up a flexible package of training materials and courses that will be translated into the home language and made available in the partner countries next spring.

Commenting on the project and its progress Project director, Afroditi Veloudaki said:

“The HeaRT project is breaking new ground. While we recognise that the sample as yet is relatively small, this survey is the first of its kind across Europe, and gives us more confidence to develop a flexible training package aimed at the needs of health journalists.

“We began with the assumption that more specialized training resources for health journalists are needed: this is now established as a fact.

“As HeaRT and its work become better known, we expect to lay the basis for bigger and fuller surveys, and to develop a network of expertise that can help to raise the standard of health journalism in every EU country. The fact that so many journalists are on the staff underlines the important role that employers can play in helping to improve training and skills.”

Journalists, editors and publishers interested in working with HeaRT to organise these training programmes are urged to contact the Project director, Afroditi Veloudaki, who will liaise with the partner organisations. More information on the project is available at <http://www.project-heart.eu/>.

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