

Guidance: reporting on clinical trials

Credible and informative reporting that keeps pace with the latest developments of the COVID-19 pandemic is desperately needed. Reporting on complex clinical trials can be daunting for reporters and, if not done well, can contribute to fear and panic in the community.

We have already seen the dangerous consequences of early reporting on the use of the drug hydroxychloroquine. As well as countless stories contributing towards the spread of misinformation in our communities.

Here are tips for reporters to keep in mind when covering the challenging scientific aspect of this public health emergency.

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1. **Don't rush to be first**

More than [500 clinical trials](#) have been launched worldwide as scientists race against time to investigate treatment options for COVID-19. But if a drug makes it to trial, that does not make it a cure. Don't fall into the trap of trying to be the first with information before it has been verified by reliable sources. Your audience will be desperate for hopeful information. Don't speculate on what these trials will find or raise expectations until you are sure of what you are reporting. Even when a trial is successful it may take time for researchers to determine the accurate dosage. Mentioning specific products, treatments or alternatives may encourage consumers to go and source medication themselves. Self-medicating can be dangerous

and can also lead to drug shortages that prevent vulnerable patients from accessing medication. See [here](#) the pitfalls of reporting on treatments before they are proven to be effective and [3 steps](#) to determine whether a medical study is newsworthy.

2. **Always verify information, even when it comes from known sources**

Let's face it. We are all humans who can make mistakes. Let politicians comment on politics and always go to medical experts to comment on medical trials. Always go back to the original information source and double-check your story is accurate and not unintentionally misleading. Ask for full copies of the research before you report on it, not just press releases or summaries. Consider building a relationship with a trusted source who you can work with to review your work. They could be a medical doctor or a scientist who has no conflict of interest in the trials. Click [here](#) for tips on finding and vetting experts during a disease outbreak.

3. **Know your terminology**

When journalists report regularly on science, they sometimes can forget it takes time to understand all the concepts and terms. #KnowTheScience, then #TranslateTheScience. One of the most important skills for a journalist is to be able to read and understand complex scientific research and terminology, then translate it for their audience. Avoid complex terminology. If you have to use it, immediately explain the term using simple language. Avoid terms such as "guaranteed" or "miraculous" as nothing in medical science is guaranteed and medicine is not a miracle. [This glossary](#) will help you to understand the complex terminology used in this crisis.

4. **Understand the limitations of trials**

Not all trials are equal, learn to look for their limitations: What was the

sample size? Was there a placebo used or a control group? Was this tested on humans or animals? Has there been peer review? A lot of scientific research is being released daily, but as scientists rush to release findings, it is our responsibility to ensure we can clearly explain the purpose of trials and their limitations to our audience. Click [here](#) for tips to evaluate studies and trials.

5. **Reality Check**

Announcements of trials and access to treatment in another country or context may vary wildly from where you are. Don't be tempted to report on other people's reporting. Always localize your story to your context and the everyday reality of your audience. Are the findings available, affordable or appropriate for your context? What advocacy efforts are underway to ensure the science will benefit the people in your country? Are there groups in the community who will not benefit from this research or medication? Are there any local safety concerns with this treatment? See [here](#) the call to increase the funding of trials in resource poor environments.

6. **Be careful with maths and metaphors**

Metaphors can be a great way to explain complex data. But make sure they don't distort or distract from the finding. Have a trusted source check your story. Ensure you know how to calculate percentages (including increases/decreases) and consider simple ways to express figures. For example, '10 people per 1,000 experienced XYZ' can be easier to imagine than '1% of people experienced XYZ', similarly saying 'people lived an average of 6 months longer' is clearer than writing 'the drug improved survival rates by X%'. Click [here](#) for a guide to maths for journalists.

7. **Don't forget the humans**

At the heart of every clinical trial there is a human. While big data can

be fascinating and exciting, it can also be difficult for your audience to relate to. Try not to get lost in the data and remember that every trial may provide great relief or heartbreak to many people living with a serious condition. Treat their story with respect, and always listen with empathy. Always remember to never include a person's name, image or identifying details without consent. See [here](#) this guide to humanizing data rich stories.

8. **Check again before you publish!!**

Clinical trials are moving at an alarming pace. Information that was accurate in the morning may be out of date by the afternoon. Always double check before you publish and include a date on your stories so that the audience can clearly see if the information may be out of date. See [here](#) why reporting on medical evidence is too important to mess up.

More guidance on reporting on clinical trials:

- All Trials: [The challenges for journalists writing about clinical trials](#)
- Australian Science Media Center: [Tips on Reporting Science](#)
- BBC News School Report: [Top ten tips: Reporting on Science](#)
- Center for Health Journalism: [Tips from a "Show Me the Evidence" Journalist](#)
- Covering Medical Research: [A guide for reporting on studies](#)
- Health News Review: [Tips for analyzing studies, medical evidence and health care claims](#)
- Journalist's Resource: [Research-based tips for reporting on science research](#)
- Pan American Health Organization: [Scientific Journalism and Coverage of Health Research](#)
- Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism: [Improving the Quality of Health Journalism](#)