

Reporting of dietary advice in UK national newspapers found to be unsatisfactory

01 December 2011

Dietary health claims made by UK newspapers are founded on insufficient evidence according to research published in the journal *Public Understanding of Science*.

Newspapers are an important part of the media in developed and developing countries and a source of information about nutrition and health for the public. They may therefore impact on the dietary choices and food-related health beliefs of their readers. Their dual objective is to entertain and inform. Media coverage of food and health is often determined by its novelty, controversy and consumer interest.

Cooper et al from King's College and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine analysed the top ten selling UK-wide newspapers for one, randomly selected week to identify the level of scientific quality of their claims. Two evidence grading scales, developed by the World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) and the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (SIGN), were used to categorise the claims identified.

According to these two scales the study found 72% and 68% of 111 dietary health claims (assessed by WCRF and SIGN criteria respectively) did not meet the recommended levels of evidence for their substantiation. As most dietary health claims analysed had an insufficient evidence base, the study concludes there is widespread misreporting of dietary health advice by UK newspapers. This inaccurate reporting may contribute to public misconceptions about food and health.

The authors provide some recommendations for future research; using experts to assess the evidence base for each claim while blinded to their source, increasing the duration of the sampling period and investigating annual fluctuation, trends over time, the impact of major news items and systematic distortions in newspaper claims. Their approach could also be applied to non-dietary health claims and other media outlets.

For more information, see

[Cooper B, Lee W, Goldacre B, Sanders, T. The quality of the evidence for dietary advice given in UK national newspapers. *Public Understanding of Science*. First published online 11 April 2011, doi:10.1177/0963662511401782](https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662511401782)