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Drug trials & the media

Media coverage of controversial HIV drug trials

Media reports of drug trials can lack accuracy and reliability, according to a study published in the open access journal BMC International Health and Human Rights. Researchers say that in controversial issues such as HIV/AIDS prevention drug trials, investigators and funders should engage with the media to avoid misinterpretation and inaccurate reporting.

The governments of Cameroon and Cambodia cancelled planned trials for the antiretroviral drug tenofovir in 2004 following activist group pressure. The trials, to investigate the use of tenofovir to prevent HIV infection, and their subsequent closure, were widely covered by the international media. Edward Mills, from McMaster University in Canada, and colleagues from the USA and the UK found that media reports were largely inconsistent and failed to seek primary sources for information.

Mills and colleagues studied all media reports on the closure of the two trials for tenofovir. Their study reveals that the reasons for the closure given by the media varied greatly and were sometimes entirely incorrect. The concerns expressed by activists and consistently reported in the press included: a lack of medical insurance for trial related injuries, human rights considerations, and inadequate care for people who contract HIV during the trial.

The researchers found that out of the 36 articles about the trials that they studied more in depth, 17 did not identify a primary source of information, only 7 reported having interviewed a trial investigator or representative and only one reported having interviewed a participant to the trial. Only one report included interviews of both trial investigators and opponents to the trials.

This study suggests that seeking reliable primary sources of information might have enabled journalists to report more accurately on the issues surrounding the trials. But

the researchers make clear it is as much the responsibility of the organisers of such trials to provide accurate information to the media and the public.

"Given the potential impact of the media in formulation of health policy related to HIV, efforts are needed to effectively engage the media during periods of controversy in the HIV/AIDS epidemic", write the authors.

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Article:

Media reporting of tenofovir trials in Cambodia and Cameroon

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