

DO THE PRINT MEDIA HELP THE MEDICAL SCIENCE? AN ANALYSIS OF FORENSIC RELATED CONTENTS IN NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

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INTRODUCTION

General public get a considerable amount of information about medical science related topics from the media. Communicating with the public through the media can be vexing for medical professionals because they lack direct control over the final reporting¹. It is the reporter's view of the information and his or her words that reach the public, rather than the scientist's or the clinician's. Moreover, there is a mismatch between the expectations of the scientist and those of the reporter. Scientists expect journalists to share their concern with scientific norms relating to the provisional nature of scientific knowledge and recognition of the collegial nature of scientific endeavour². However subspecialty such as in forensics there are diverse concerns about published material in the print media. Issues are more or less the same in other specialties as well.

Forensic science related incidence and crime reporting has to be done with an intention of giving important message to the public and to serve the criminal justice system in the country. From the public perspective, newspapers are a major source of information in a country like Sri Lanka having quite high literacy rate. The news should impart knowledge, influence the understanding of issues by their readers and may also act as advocates for the recipients of news items³. But this ideal situation is unfeasible some times; the public cannot understand the language of a scientific enterprise. There are different perspectives in writers mind and editors of the print media. On the other hand even scientists have trouble communicating across sub disciplines and with media and public. Given that the ideal cannot be realized, what standards should be used for judging reporting about medical science and how well is the current reporting in the print media needs consideration.

Reporters need to gain newspaper space (and ultimately an audience) for their topics, so they are prone to include sensationalistic, absolutist or at least dramatic statements. This drive conflicts

with the norms of science journalism, which encourage cautious, detailed, balanced reporting, thus reflect the norms of the science that is covered⁴. While various existing codes have some differences most share common elements including the principles of truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public accountability^{5,6,7}. One of the leading voices in the United States on the subject of Journalistic Standards and Ethics is the Society of Professional Journalists. The preamble to its Code of Ethics states public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The reporting in relation to forensic contexts involves rights of the victims, assailants, and their families. Analysis of forensic contents and ethical aspects of reporting on newspapers will give an insight of the current trend.

OBJECTIVES

The general objective of this study was to assess the reporting of forensic related contents on newspapers. The specific objectives were to identify the forensic related contents appearing in Sri Lankan newspapers and to analyse the ethical reporting of the contents.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Forensic related news items and articles numbering 440 were reviewed from published contents of two leading Sinhala and English newspapers in 2009 and 2010 between December 1st and May 31st. The content analysis was carried out on Forensic related crimes and ethical aspects of reporting them. The scrutinized data was extracted into a pre-planned work sheet and analyzed using SPSS 10 computer software.

RESULTS

Figure: 1

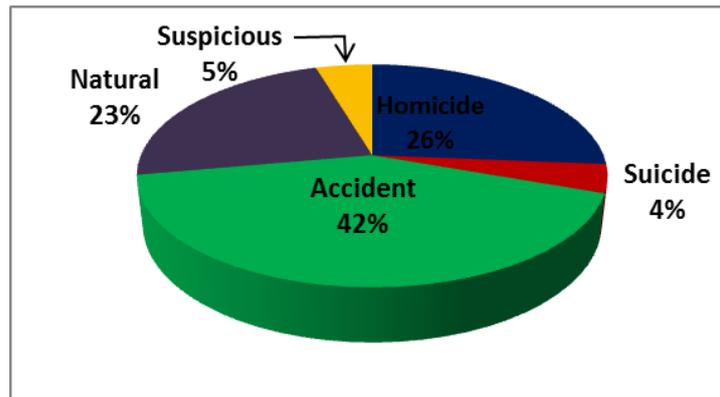


Figure: 2

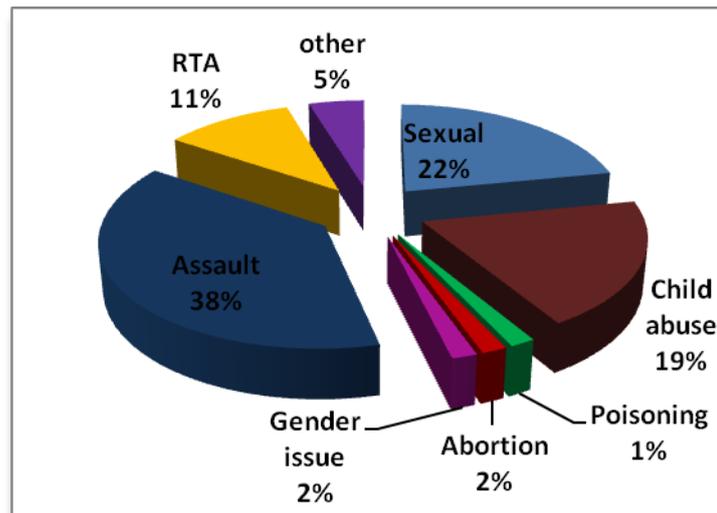
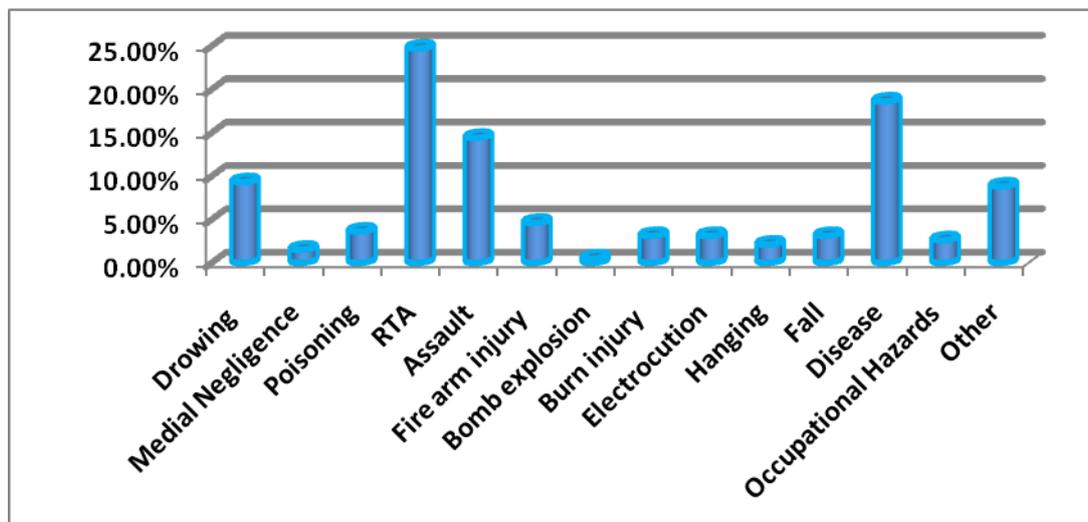


Figure: 3



Majority of the Forensic related articles were written by a person from the paper (73.4%). Most of the forensic related contents appeared as news items (86.6%) and the rest as feature articles (13.4%). In majority of Forensic Pathology cases the circumstance of death was due to accidental causes [Figure: 1]. The cause of death in majority of Forensic Pathology cases was road traffic accident. [Figure: 3].

The majority of reported clinical cases were due to assault, sexual and child abuse. [Figure: 2] The ethical aspects revealed majority of the forensic content was without sensationalisation (75.5%). Only 28.4% of the content provided the whole facts related to an incident. The source of information was revealed in 50.5% of the forensic content.

DISCUSSION

Forensic science related incidence and crime reporting has to be done with an intention of giving important message to the public and to serve the criminal justice system in the country. From the public perspective, newspapers are a major source of information in a country like Sri Lanka having quite high literacy rate. The news should impart knowledge, influence the understanding of issues by their readers and may also act as advocates for the recipients of news items³. The statistics related to violence available at the police department for the year 2010 closely depicts the forensic related news items appeared in the newspapers. Newspapers are giving coverage mainly as news items and the Forensic related contents are authored by nonmedical people. Therefore with relevance to forensic context they lack the expertise and knowledge to report matters concerning to different medico legal issues and thus may result in false interpretation of facts. This can result in pain and agony for the immediate family members when the facts get distorted.

According to this study the ethical aspects of reporting was to most extent adhered by the authors. The often expected sensationalisation was not explicitly found even though Forensic Medicine is an area for sensational reporting. In contradiction only a small percentage of news items (28.4%) provided the whole facts related to the incident. The concept of balanced reporting for the general public to decide was less visible with regard to forensic contents. Therefore whether this would indirectly promote sensationalisation is questionable. At the same time the availability of spacing for forensic content in a newspaper would have compromised the reporter to restrict on important matters. The lack of space for forensic related contents was proven by this research where majority were news items found in a small space (73.9%) and most of the forensic related items occupied the middle pages of a newspaper (89.5%).

The expected duty of the newspapers to educate public and give suggestions to improve the criminal justice system with regard to forensic medicine related matters was found to be not satisfactory. The lack of interest shown by the papers in this regard may be due to several reasons. The forensic news items carry an interest in relation to crime than health education. The general public must stress the need to approach

crime related events in a balanced as well as educative manner.

CONCLUSION

Only a small percentage of Forensic contents appeared in newspapers gave recommendations to improve the criminal justice system and educate public. The Sri Lankan newspapers abided by the ethical reporting of forensic related contents in most publications.

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DECLARATION

We wish to declare that the abstract of this paper was accepted for poster presentation at the 10th Indo-Pacific Congress on Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences 2010.