

Survey of Health Journalists About Reporting on Chronic Pain
Extended Abstract

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In 2011, the Institute of Medicine report, *Relieving Pain in America: A Blueprint for Transforming Prevention, Care, Education, and Research*, highlighted the burden of chronic pain in the United States. Per this report, more than 100 million Americans live with chronic pain, more than those affected by heart disease, diabetes, and cancer combined, with an annual national economic cost estimated between \$560 billion and \$635 billion (IOM, 2011; Steglitz, Buscemi, & Ferguson, 2012). Yet, the social issue of chronic pain has been routinely minimized by the medical establishment, politicians, media and society.

The opioid epidemic in the United States is a reality and an acute public health problem. Since 1999, the deaths by drug overdoses increased almost threefold; in 2015, 33,091 deaths (63.1% of total deaths due to overdoses) involved an opioid, an increase compared to the previous year (Rudd, 2016). A report by the Drug Enforcement Administration, released in November of 2016, highlights prescription drugs, heroin and fentanyl as “the most significant drug-related threats to the United States” (DEA, 2016). The same report mentions that while reported cases of abuse of commonly prescription drugs (CPDs) have plateaued and even slightly decreased starting in 2012, the number of overdoses due to heroin has increased dramatically. CDC’s data for 2000-2015 also showcases the abrupt increase in deaths due to synthetic opioids (CDC, 2015).

Misuse and abuse of prescription opioids fuels the current opioid epidemic. According to the CDC, the most common drugs involved in prescription drugs overdoses are Methadone, Oxycodone and Hydrocodone. It is estimated that in 2014 more than two million Americans abused or were dependent on opioids (Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, 2015).

Media plays an important role in modeling public opinion about a multitude of issues, from political candidates to recreational use of psychotropic substances (Heinderyckx & Vos, 2016; Shoemaker, Vos, & Reese, 2009). Although the wide adoption of the internet and social media has impacted the gatekeeping role of the journalist, media outlets still have a significant influence on what salient issues become part of the public agenda (Aruguete, 2017; Kirby-Petruccio, 2017).

To better understand how journalists approach stories about chronic pain as well as their beliefs and opinions about chronic pain, opioid addiction and the relationship between these two ailments, the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What type of sources do health journalists use when writing health stories?

RQ2. What are the health journalists perceived relationships between chronic pain and opioid addiction?

RQ3. With chronic pain touching one-in-three Americans, how does experiencing chronic pain influence reporting, opinions and attitudes of health journalists about chronic pain?

To our knowledge, the present study is the first ever attempt to directly explore attitudes and beliefs of health journalists about chronic pain and their perceived relationships between chronic pain and opioid abuse.

Note: The present extended abstract only reports on findings from the survey associated with quantitative data. Findings from qualitative data analysis as well as more complex data analyses will be reported elsewhere.

Method

To answer the above research questions, the researchers developed a survey instrument based in part on previous research on attitudes and beliefs about people living with chronic pain, previous research on attitudes and beliefs of reporters and journalists, and an overview of current academic literature on reporting about chronic pain and opioid addiction.

The survey was administered online and the link to the survey was distributed to contact lists via email.

Results

Response rate calculated according to AAPOR (American Association for Public Opinion Research) formula was 17.3%, with a maximum cooperation rate of 98.7% (AAPOR Response Rate Calculator V4.0 – May 2016). 230 participants started the survey. Of these, 193 provided complete responses and 37 were partially completed surveys. Nevertheless, our approach uses a self-selected, non-probability sampling, so response rates should be interpreted accordingly.

Journalists participating in our survey had an average of about 19 years of professional experience (N=136) and have worked an average of nine years for the same media company (N=116). All media channels have been represented, from newspapers to broadcast to online media.

74.47% of participants identified themselves as females and 25.53% as males (N=188). Mean age for the sample was 48.2 years. Although gender-based stereotyping and assignment of news beats is unprofessional, historically there are many more women covering beats like health or social life than men. This, as well as higher predisposition of women to answer calls for research participation may explain the gender structure of our sample.

Freelancers (42.71%), reporters (27.6%) and editors (16.67%) were the most significant jobs held by our respondents (N=192). 92.05% were Whites, 3.41% African-American and 2.84% identified themselves as Hispanic (N=176).

Primary sources for health stories (aggregated data Agree/Strongly agree - percentages) include medical professionals, local, state and federal officials, patients, and spokespeople. Medical sources rank first as the source for chronic pain articles.

When asked about the influence that local, state and federal agencies have on their development of health story ideas, participants emphasized the higher value of federal agencies as sources of reliable statistics and reports. Not so much for local or state agencies.

Sixty-three percent of respondents (N=200) believe that chronic pain is a MAJOR CAUSE of opioid substance abuse. Only 8.5% disagree. 28.5% of respondents neither agree or disagree, don't know or don't have an opinion.

80.59% of respondents (N=201) believe that chronic pain is a major public health problem in the United States, while 90.55% consider opioid substance abuse a serious public health problem in our country. A larger proportion of respondents perceive opioid substance abuse as a serious public health problem.

Most health reporters and editors participating in our survey (69.35%) think that there is a DIRECT RELATIONSHIP between chronic pain and opioid substance abuse (N=199). Only 3.01% disagree.

Nevertheless, when asked if they believe that chronic pain sufferers experience more opioid overdoses than other users of opioids, almost half of them stated that they don't know (48.26%) and opinions were split between those in agreement with the above statement and those disagreeing with it (14.43% agreement vs. 12.93% disagreement).

Beliefs that the current opioid epidemic is due in part to people with chronic pain failing to manage their medications are also split among our participants: 20.71% disagree, while 27.28% agree (N=198). A similar percentage state that they don't know (22.22%), while 29.8% don't have an opinion.

There is stronger agreement among our participants (N=200) that overprescribing of opioids by doctors for chronic pain is the primary cause of the opioid epidemic (36.5% agreement vs. 18% disagreement). While those without a set opinion are at levels somewhat like those found on our previous question (33%), the percentage of those that declared that they don't know is almost half that in the previous question: 12.5%.

Over 50 percent (51.5%) of our participants (N=200) don't know if most deaths from opioid addiction are people who do not suffer from chronic pain. 20.5% believe that that is the case and only 4% disagree.

27.18% of the health reporters and editors who participated in our survey (N=195) have experienced chronic pain (defined as pain that occurs on at least half the days for six months or more), and 15.9% of them are current chronic pain sufferers. 58.46% of them state that they have knowledge of a family member or an acquaintance that has suffered from chronic pain. Of the 53 journalists who stated that they have personally experienced chronic pain, 41 of them have written stories about chronic pain or have covered the topic. Of these, 30 (73.17%) stated that their experience influenced their coverage of the topic. Many said they have more understanding of the issue and more empathy for those suffering chronic pain. Others state that their experience has not influenced their reporting on this topic.

About 50% of the journalists responding to the survey have written stories about chronic pain, and more than 50% of participating journalists have written stories about opioid addiction.

There are statistically significant differences between journalists that have experienced chronic pain and those that have not on perspectives of chronic pain and opioid use: Journalists who have experienced chronic pain are significantly less likely to associate chronic pain with opioid use/abuse.

Discussion

Similar to findings from other studies, experts are a significant source of story ideas and information about health topics (Entwistle, 1995; Van Trigt, Haaijer-Ruskamp, Willems, & Tromp, 1994). For our sample of health journalists, they were the primary source, followed by federal agencies, which are mostly tapped as sources because of the statistical data they can provide. The same pattern was visible for both general health reporting as well as reporting on chronic pain. Patients seem to be approached only to be used as illustrating examples for stories that are driven by the information from experts.

Health journalists perceive both opioid addiction and chronic pain as being serious public health problem, which is consistent with the severity of both issues. Nevertheless, they think the opioid epidemic is a more serious public health problem, although research suggests that chronic pain cases surpass opioid dependency cases by 50 to 1. The opioid epidemic does get more media coverage, as well as being a more politicized issue than chronic pain.

Health journalists have strong opinions about the relationship between chronic pain and opioid addiction, with almost 70% of those answering our survey thinking that there is a direct

relationship between chronic pain and opioid substance abuse. Some studies do suggest that there is a direct relationship between the length of a treatment with opioids for a non-malignant disease and aberrant medication-taking behaviors (Becker et al., 2009; Martell et al., 2007), while the long-term benefits of opioid therapy are unclear. Other studies have found opioids effective in the long term for both pain control and functional outcomes (Furlan, Sandoval, Mailis-Gagnon, & Tunks, 2006). Højsted & Sjøgren, in a comprehensive literature review, found that the prevalence of addiction varies between 0% and 50% in chronic, non-malignant patients, and from 0% to 7.7% in cancer patients (Højsted & Sjøgren, 2007). When asked specifically about data to support that opinion about the relationship between chronic pain and opioid addiction, most of the health journalists that responded to our survey said that they don't know.

More than a quarter of the health reporters and editors who participated in our survey have experienced chronic pain, and 15.9% of them are current chronic pain sufferers. Over half of them stated that they have knowledge of a family member or an acquaintance who has suffered from chronic pain. Direct experience with chronic pain has influenced their storytelling practices to some extent. The largest impact was evidenced on how those who have experienced chronic pain covered chronic pain stories, with almost three quarters of them confirming influence of their coverage. They state that the influence mostly addresses a better understanding of the struggles of those living with chronic pain and being more empathetic to sufferers. Also, those that have experience chronic pain are significantly less likely to associate chronic pain with opioid use/abuse.

The present study has two significant limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the presented results. First, the relatively small number of respondents, which the authors blame on the limited access to distribution lists and the sensitivity of the topic. Nevertheless, the uniform geographic distribution of the participants is encouraging. Second, the self-selected sampling method used for the study, imposed by the web administration of the survey, which may have favored a certain skewness in the opinions of those participating in the survey. Since this being the first ever endeavor of this nature ever conducted, further studies should try to expand the scope and reach and address some of these limitations.

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