

News Media

Why the News Media Need Genetics Education

With the rapid advances of the Human Genome Project, science and health care reporters are serving a valuable role as consumer informants. The news media is often the main source of information on genetics for the general public. Our society's reliance on the media for information makes it imperative that published and broadcast materials are accurate.

Information Needs

The Genetics Education Steering Committee members and public hearing participants have said the media need to understand:

- **Where to go for sources and reliable information.** Since news reporters are expected to play an objective, third-party role, they typically gather information from multiple sources when conducting research for a story. Considering the large amount of outdated and inaccurate genetics information in existence, the media need to be provided with the names of reliable spokespeople, as well as accurate published information that can be referenced during development of a story. This is vital, considering ever-changing information and the potential number of articles that will be generated over the next decade.
- **Appropriate medical terminology and phrases.** From a sensitivity and awareness standpoint, media representatives need to understand the importance of using accurate and appropriate terminology. One example is the ability to communicate the difference between a genetic test result that yields a diagnosis versus an increased risk. The impact of inaccurate or misleading news reports on affected families can be significant and emotionally damaging.
- **Awareness of ethical issues.** How reporters address ethical issues related to genetics is particularly difficult to address. Many media reports focus on scientific discoveries, with little or no mention of the ethical issues surrounding them. On the reverse side, full-page feature stories are beginning to emerge that deal almost exclusively with the emotional and ethical sides of major breakthroughs, such as the discovery of a breast cancer gene. Do feature stories on ethics raise awareness at the expense of heightened consumer fears? Do they defeat genetics education because people are afraid to access services? The answer is simply that informed consumers are better prepared to make choices. The media does, however, have an obligation to avoid irresponsible sensationalism.

Educational Challenges

Nature of the job. Members of the news media are not paid or trained to become experts on all issues, including genetics. Rather, their job is to report on news events, including scientific findings, in a way that is understandable to their audience. Fast-paced deadlines do not always provide reporters with the opportunity to fully research and understand each issue on which they report. This means that proactive campaigns can and should be undertaken, although information-on-demand services will most likely be utilized when a story is under development.

A related challenge is balancing **media hype**. The headline is only a small part of the news, but by design it gets the most attention. Persuading reporters to think about headlines and soundbites differently is asking them to do their job differently.

Educational Recommendations

Conduct editorial board briefings. Editorial boards are most often convened to discuss current events and somewhat controversial topics. A meeting of this type, therefore, would have the greatest effect surrounding a legislative proposal or significant discovery. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss one or more sides of an issue, and how the media outlet is responding. These meetings should not be adversarial in nature, but regarded as an educational opportunity.

Disseminate frequent information to local health reporters. Mailings might include a resource list for finding genetics information and services, a contact list for media questions and information kits that relate to recent scientific discoveries.

Correct inaccuracies swiftly. Letters to the editor and retraction requests are two means of correcting inaccurate information reported by the media. In order to be received credibly, these methods should be employed when the error is on the reporter's end and presented without contempt or hostility. In the case of spokesperson errors, more often than not, these can and should be dismissed. The spokesperson must take responsibility for his or her role in the dissemination of accurate information. A letter to the reporter noting the error is a good way to maintain credibility with the news organization. In either case, errors should be brought to light quickly -- the day of, or day following -- for greatest impact.

Current Resources, Future Plans & Partnership Opportunities

There are no genetics education programs or resources designed especially for the media, although they have the same access to information as the general public (See page 35 for listing).

Following are organizational plans which indicate a willingness on behalf of organization representatives to explore or execute genetics education initiatives. In many cases, however, the ability of these individuals to meet the objectives listed is contingent upon funding, staffing or other support. For that reason, this section of the target audience plan is subject to periodic revisions, based on changing levels of organizational commitments.

Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center presently conducts a periodic media seminar related to cancer biology. The organization is exploring ways to develop an expanded program to educate journalists and science writers about genetics issues, particularly as they relate to scientific research.

University of Washington Genetic Resource Line is a toll-free phone service that enables health and social service providers in Washington to access information on human genetics issues. Callers can receive current and accurate information about genetics issues, as well as referrals to local resources.

The University of Washington plans to continue offering the Genetic Resource Line to health care providers in Washington, and has indicated an interest in opening the line to all audiences identified in this plan, including the news media. (Also see: Cross-Audience Recommendations section.)