

# Letters

## COMMENT & RESPONSE

### Preventing Media-Based False Hopes: A Shared Responsibility

**To the Editor** In their Research Letter, O’Keeffe and colleagues<sup>1</sup> confront us with the flawed, incomplete, and exaggerated ways that the media covers early detection tests. The authors’ impressive search results show us why physicians and researchers have to keep in mind that every day, patients may consult us with high hopes based on overstated news articles. When these articles discuss new treatments or possible cures, a patient’s hopes will often turn out to be false. Especially regarding early detection tests, most patients are unaware or uninformed of the downsides. O’Keeffe and colleagues call for higher-quality reporting by journalists, coupled with strategies to improve media reporting. Recent research with comparable findings made similar suggestions and produced a “guide to reading health care news stories.”<sup>2</sup>

Although higher-quality reporting by media is definitely needed, we would argue that physicians and researchers can be part of the solution by providing precise scientific communication. Improved communication starts with clear and concrete formulation of research results—eg, using absolute risks and numbers needed to treat or harm rather than relative risks. Upon publication, research should be properly communicated by means of a nuanced scientific press release. Researchers cannot underestimate the importance of cowriting these press releases with their communications colleagues. As pointed out in the Invited Commentary by McCartney,<sup>3</sup> recent research has found a strong association between exaggerated news and overstated press releases.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, when medical professionals are interviewed by journalists or

asked for their opinion on research or health news, they should be keenly aware of the substantial influence that any overstated or premature claims can have on patient expectations. Lastly, as we are experiencing daily in our own medical practice, it can be both useful and rewarding to play a role in translating medical research into summaries written in layperson’s terms with practical application. Providing these summaries via online platforms may be among the strategies that O’Keeffe and colleagues<sup>1</sup> are calling for and are a great way for medical professionals to take the lead on preventing false hope.

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