

# Diabetes TV News Coverage Lags Behind

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Millions of Americans depend on the national nightly network news programs for current events information (1). Previous studies showed that nightly network news coverage about diabetes paled in comparison with that given to cancer and heart disease during the 1970s and 1980s (2,3). We evaluated whether the amount of national news coverage given to diabetes had improved during the 1990s and the extent to which racial disparities in diabetes had been highlighted. Specific objectives included tracking diabetes-related coverage on major nightly network news programs for the last 10 years, comparing diabetes coverage with that of cancer and heart disease, and examining the content of diabetes-related coverage.

The Vanderbilt Television News Archives (VTNA) has videotaped, catalogued, and indexed nightly news broadcasts from ABC, CBS, and NBC since 1968 (4). In addition, the VTNA began doing the same with the CNN evening news beginning in 1989. The VTNA abstract indexes were searched for keywords "diabetes," "cancer," and "heart disease." The content of each diabetes-related abstract and selected cancer and heart disease abstracts were examined to determine whether disease-specific racial disparities were reported.

From 1 January 1991 through 31 December 2000, a total of 77 diabetes-related reports were aired by ABC (22 reports), CBS (35 reports), NBC (18 reports), or CNN (2 reports). Because each network may carry essentially the same story on occasion (e.g., two of the net-

works carried the announcement of the Diabetes Control and Complications Trial results and three announced the initial successes of the Alberta protocol), the number of nonoverlapping reports was 62. By contrast, a total of 1,695 cancer and 2,151 overlapping heart disease-related broadcasts aired during the same decade. These overlapping totals were at least 20-fold higher than those for diabetes-related broadcasts. Nonoverlapping cancer and heart disease-related broadcasts were certain, therefore, to be multifold higher than those for diabetes-related broadcasts.

Of the 23 diabetes-related stories aired in 2000 (30% of all diabetes-related reports during the decade), 12 reported the problems with Rezulin. Since 1995, 12 reported the increasing prevalence of diabetes. Three stories, including two about the death of Ella Fitzgerald in 1994, involved celebrities. The U.K. Prospective Diabetes Study was not covered. Only one story, a 1996 CBS report featuring the effects of diet and exercise on Pima Indians, mentioned racial disparities in diabetes. These disparities, however, were more often mentioned in news reports related to both cancer and heart disease.

Diabetes-related coverage by local newscasts and entertainment programming were not assessed in this study. These media have undoubtedly made valuable contributions to Americans' diabetes awareness. The national nightly network news programs, nevertheless, have greater potential for widely and routinely disseminating diabetes-related messages. Increased coverage of stories involving diabetes research and diabetes-related peo-

ple, products, and pharmaceuticals would certainly complement the efforts of the National Diabetes Education Program to improve diabetes management (5). Attention to diabetes in racial and ethnic minorities might be especially helpful.

The TV news data over the past 30 years suggest that national government and voluntary health organizations that advocate for cancer and heart disease continue to be at least 20 times more effective than diabetes advocates at consistently and repeatedly bringing disease-related stories to the nation. In addition, national news coverage has virtually ignored racial disparities in diabetes. We can and must do better.

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A table elsewhere in this issue shows conventional and Système International (SI) units and conversion factors for many substances.