

### Hitting the Headlines

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Health stories are news stories. Most days, newspapers carry reports about health care, including stories of the effectiveness of new treatments or diagnostic tests. Such stories can create expectations or anxieties in patients and pressure for health professionals. It is important therefore to know the facts behind the headlines.

The aim of the Hitting the Headlines (HtH) service is to provide busy health professionals with a rapid and reliable analysis of the evidence behind selected news reports. Staff at the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (CRD) have been commissioned by the National Library for Health (NLH) to locate and systematically examine the research behind the headlines. CRD staff provide a rapid assessment of the original research behind the news story and evaluate how accurately the journalists have reported the findings of the research. Unbiased, brief and readable summaries are posted on the NLH web site within 48 hours of publication of the newspaper articles.

The purpose of this project is to ensure that patients and health professionals are better informed about the accuracy of reporting of research into the effectiveness of new treatments, drugs and other health care interventions in the press.



### Story Selection

Each week day morning CRD staff scan all the national newspapers (*Daily Express, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Daily Star, Daily Telegraph, Financial Times, The Guardian, The Independent, The Sun* and *The Times*) to identify news stories that fit the project's selection criteria. CRD are contracted to do one to two summaries a week. To be selected, news stories have to be about the effects of a health related intervention. This may be a new drug, surgical procedure or a diagnostic test or intervention that is, or could be, provided by the NHS. It also includes health promotion/ prevention programmes that are, or could be, provided or recommended by the NHS. The newspaper article has to be based upon research evidence and has to include enough information to enable CRD information staff to locate the research paper.

### Type of HtH Summary

Usually HtH summaries include a full critical appraisal of the research referred to in the newspaper article. Information staff at CRD are experienced in locating research articles and go to great lengths to track down the evidence behind a news story. Sometimes however, they are unable to find the research. This may be because it is not yet available; the newspaper article has been based on a press release or conference abstract and the research is not yet in the public domain. When the research cannot be traced a bullet point summary will be prepared, which considers the newspaper story and gives details of why the research is unavailable.

Given the aim to make summaries live within 48 hours of newspaper publication, newspaper stories that discuss multiple research studies are



only selected if the topic is of high public interest (for example MMR, HRT). When we do address multiple research studies, each research paper is appraised individually and the summaries are produced as a series and posted as Part 1, Part 2 etc.

### A Working Example

#### **'A glass of red wine every day prevents deafness'**

<http://www.library.nhs.uk/rss/newsAndRssArticle.aspx?uri=http://www.library.nhs.uk/resources/?id=125835>

HtH summaries are produced by staff at CRD who have varying and complementary skills. These skills include expertise in identifying and retrieving information, critical appraisal of research literature and presentation and promotion of research findings. Summaries are produced in stages and the aims, standards and rigour behind each stage of the process, are presented below.

'WE SAID: RED  
WINE CAN STOP  
DEAFNESS'

A member of the CRD Dissemination Team scanned the daily news feed, a summary of all health related national UK newspaper stories, and the national newspapers themselves, to see if any of the stories matched the project's criteria. It had been a slow news week for HtH, but on Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> May 2006, there was a story that looked suitable. The amusing headlines of these articles included 'WE SAID: RED WINE CAN STOP DEAFNESS', and 'Hears to Red Wine'. Of the four newspapers that covered





this story, one did not give the source of the story, merely stating that 'researchers found that...'. The other three newspapers all named the researcher involved and that he came from Michigan; two stated the source of the story as an article in New Scientist, and the other stated that the research had been presented at a 'London conference'. The newspaper articles were photocopied (under license) and handed to the duty Information Officer.

For every summary a copy of the original research needs to be obtained. This could be in any format, ranging from an article in a major journal like the BMJ, to a presentation being given at a medical conference. If nothing at all can be found then the story has to be abandoned.

The first stage of investigation for this story was to find both the article in the New Scientist and the conference abstract. The New Scientist article was easy to track down and a reference to the relevant article 'Let's hear it again for red wine' was identified online. With a visit to the University library next door we were then able to retrieve the full text. However, with only the name of the researcher to search with, finding the conference abstract proved more difficult.

The New Scientist article did not give many details about the research, but it did give more information about the 'London conference'. The conference was 'an ear conference at the University College London last week'. A straight forward Google search was then able to identify a press release on the relevant conference, 'An Ear to the Future'. The abstract we were looking for was not published online, but the site did provide a contact





telephone number for more information. The person on the other end of the line was very helpful and forwarded a pdf file of all the conference abstracts. The conference abstract gave little additional information and the main focus of the presentation did not appear to about red wine at all.

Having the name of the researcher and his location in Michigan, led us to try his local university website (located via the Universities of the World website <http://geowww.uibk.ac.at/univ/>). From there we identified a press release from April 2006 on aspirin helping to combat hearing loss associated with a specific antibiotic. The press release was evidently referring to the same research as the newspapers. A reference to the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) was contained in this article and this time the full-text of this was available from our own CRD library. The reference, although not indicated in the press release, turned out to be a research letter which gave only brief information about the original research. All this information was sent to the two reviewers (researchers skilled in critical appraisal) who were to write the summary.

The HtH team (information, dissemination and reviewers) discussed what had been found and what approach should be taken to writing the summary. A variety of templates are available for the critical appraisal of different types of evidence such as systematic reviews, randomized controlled trials, or case-control studies, within the HtH format. In this case, given the incomplete nature of the available evidence, the team decided that a bullet point summary would be most appropriate.

The Information Officer passed on the collected information (newspaper articles, New Scientist article, conference abstracts, press release, research letter) to the reviewer who would write the article. After closely reading all of the materials the reviewer confirmed that the study reported in the New Scientist and two of the newspaper articles was the same as that reported in the research letter sent to NEJM. However, it was clear that the study was about antibiotic-induced (rather than age-related) hearing loss, and that despite the newspapers' amusing headlines about red wine, the research was in fact about the effects of aspirin. This disparity between what the research was actually about and the message a reader would take from the newspapers seemed to be the most appropriate focus for the HtH summary.

The reviewer drafted an article with four bullet points, describing: (1) which newspapers reported the story and what they said; (2) CRD's attempts to obtain the empirical research supporting claims made in the newspapers; (3) the subject of the original research study; (4) the accuracy of the newspaper reports and the lack of evidence about wine consumption and hearing loss. All HTH stories start with a 50 word summary stating what the newspapers reported, the nature and reliability of the evidence and the accuracy of the newspaper reports. This is the last part to be written because the reviewers' comments on the reliability of the research are needed to inform this section.

If a full research paper had been located the reviewer would have read and critically assessed the research. They would then have written a structured description of the research and commented on the reliability of the researcher's conclusions, as well as the accuracy of the newspaper reports. This would then have been passed to the second CRD reviewer, who would

have gone through the same process. Opinions would then have been compared and any disagreements resolved through discussion. As this was a bullet point only story the reviewer sent the completed template directly back to the Dissemination Officer for proof reading and for any changes necessary to improve clarity and readability.

In addition to providing links to the original research behind the story, press release and the newspaper articles where possible, the Information Officer also searched for other topic specific links. It is not possible in the time frame to comment on the relationship between the research appraised in a HtH summary and the existing evidence base. As an alternative we therefore search for systematic review evidence closely related to the topic and add links to any we find to assist with contextualising the findings. The sources we search are the Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects (DARE), the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (CDSR), the Health Technology Assessment (HTA) database and the CRD website. All these resources can be assessed via <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/crd/>. For the story on red wine and hearing loss no systematic reviews were identified.

In addition the Information Officer identified key relevant consumer links which may be useful to the public with an interest in this topic. Good sources of relevant sites are NHS Direct (<http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/>) and OMNI (<http://omni.ac.uk>). In this instance, NHS Direct had some useful information on hearing impairment and three charities gave practical advice for deafened people and further information on hearing loss. Had there been any related stories in the HtH archive these too would have been listed.



All the links were added to the summary, which was then marked up by the Information Officer using HTML and pasted into the standard NLH template. Staff at NLH activated the file so that the summary became available to users of the NLH web site. CRD staff then issued an email alerting list members to the new summary.

### Conclusions

The NLH and CRD believe that 'HtH' is useful to all those working in health care and patients when deciding on the accuracy of a news report. It is another way of getting high quality information on effectiveness to the people who need it.

### Further Information

For further information about the HtH project go to <http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/hth/help.asp>. CRD also provides an Information and Enquiry service free for NHS staff, which offers help with searches for evidence syntheses including systematic reviews, economic evaluations and guidelines. They can also assist in searching the CRD databases. The service is available 9-5 Monday to Friday at [crd-info@york.ac.uk](mailto:crd-info@york.ac.uk) or telephone 01904 321846.

If you would like to receive regular emails alerting you that a new HtH summary has been posted on the NLH website, go to <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?SUBED1=crd-hth&A=1>

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