

Medicine in the media: who's holding the bag?



By [Chamendran Naidoo](#)

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A lack of information isn't something modern society has to worry about. Quite the contrary, today we actually face an information overload. Where previously, news was limited to a wiggled horseman riding from town to town delivering his message, we now enter an era where the horse itself may bombard us with endless equestrian ramblings via its Twitter feed.

As we are subjected to this barrage of information with each blog post, tweet and talk show jostling for its time in the sun, it is easier than ever for content producers to err on the side of attention-grabbing sensationalism, rather than staying true to cold hard facts. For this reason, it's important for all producers of content to take a certain level of responsibility for their work, especially in the medical field where it can be easy to prey on the public's thoughts of their own mortal fragility.

As a practicing doctor, with a considerably active social-media life, and co-presenter on a nationally broadcast medical talk show, I've been able to examine some of the pitfalls and challenges regarding medicine in the media. From this viewpoint, I'd like to propose methods for content producers to overcome these difficulties by assuming responsibility for, and thus exploiting, the potential of information.

Talking to the camera, as I've found, is not dissimilar to holding a consultation; although in this case, instead of conveying information to an individual and his/her loved ones, you're conversing with millions of viewers who span a vast array of socio-economic strata, education and language levels, as well as religious and cultural backgrounds. Where the difficulty lies, is in the lack of feedback that is usually afforded by face-to-face discussion. This being said, principles of good communication are as applicable in a studio as they are in the consultation room.

Doctors are the gatekeepers of highly specialized information and have a responsibility to convey this knowledge in sincere, concise and easy-to-understand language, while trying to avoid medical jargon. Doctors should also steer away from "dumbing down" in order to retain the essence of information. As you can imagine, this is a fine line to tread without constant feedback from your audience.

To do this well, information should be transferred in small chunks in a well-paced manner, which allows time for the audience to process what is being said, followed by summarizing the most important points at the end. Also, it should be stressed that all forms of media are informative and serve as a screening tool *at most*, and cannot supersede physical examination and diagnosis by a physician.

The opinion of the doctor as a well-respected expert is preserved through all forms of media, and thus should be heeded responsibly. There exists a delicate balance that the producer has to strike between entertaining and informing the

audience, so as to not distort reality or, as I've mentioned, err on the side of sensationalism in the quest for the almighty "Audience Rating".

With medical knowledge being readily available via radios, computers, televisions, and even cellular phones, ignorance is no longer an option in greater society. This introduces an immense opportunity for health promotion and disease prevention through passive and, more importantly, voluntary education.

However, choose your source of information wisely, as the next time you quote the lyrical epithets of an equine-tweet, you may just land up with foot-in-mouth disease.

ABOUT CHAMENDRAN NAIDOO

Chamendran Naidoo works as a General Practitioner in the SA Navy. His interests include fine surgery as well as approaching the patient as a whole in a Bio-Psycho-Social manner. He is passionate about the immersion of medicine into everyday life which he actively manages via social media fronts. Chamendran is also a co-presenter on SABC3's Dr Mbl Show. Email Chamendran on chamendran@hotmail.com and follow him on Twitter at [@Chamendran](https://twitter.com/Chamendran).

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