

Lunch Panel Discussion

Moderator John Hamer is Executive Director of the Washington News Council. He is a graduate of Dartmouth College and has a Master's Degree in Journalism from Stanford University.

Panelists:

Gail Geller, Sc.D., is an Associate Professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, with primary affiliations in Genetics and Public Policy Studies and the Bioethics Institute. She received her doctorate from the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health with concentrations in Bioethics and Social Sciences.

Many Americans rely on the mass media for scientific and medical information. Media coverage of genetic discoveries is likely to influence consumers' understanding of and interest in the use of new genetic technologies. As part of a larger study aimed at describing and improving the reporting of new genetic discoveries, we developed a system for assessing the Accuracy, Balance and Content (ABC) of such reports in the mass print, radio and television media. Checklist items were generated by the investigators and by focus groups of 23 consumers. The checklist was then validated by asking 12 scientists and 16 journalists which items should be included. The final checklist items related to description and credibility of the research, genetics and epidemiology of the disease-gene association, disease description and implications of the discovery. We then analyzed 33 stories covering the cloning of the BRCA1 gene in 1994, and 18 stories covering linkage of a prostate cancer gene to chromosome 1 in 1996. These stories were taken from various media sources. In this talk, I will summarize and synthesize results of our content analysis of these stories including a review of headlines and lead sentences to show the variability in emphasis and the potential for misleading inferences. For example, on average, only about half of the checklist items were addressed in these stories, although most stories correctly reported the broad implications of the genetic discovery. However, only one third of stories indicated that the genes are associated with early-onset disease, and a minority mentioned that the discovery only pertains to high-risk families. Therefore, there is variation in the accuracy and content of stories emanating from each discovery, and the extent to which they balance the positive and negative implications of the discoveries. Although there are some false statements, most errors are ones of omission rather than commission. Because of such omissions, people may believe that discovery of new genes will have immediate implications for broad segments of the population.

Meg O'Connor is Healthlink Reporter for KING 5 Television. She received her Bachelor's degree in Government and Theater from Smith College.

Carol Ostrom is a Reporter for The Seattle Times who frequently writes about science and health news. She received her degree in English Literature from the University of Washington.