

# Assessing the quality of health news stories in the Australian media using the Media Doctor website

*Amanda Wilson<sup>1\*</sup>, Jane Robertson<sup>1</sup>, David Henry<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>School of Medicine and Public Health, The University of Newcastle

<sup>2</sup>The Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences, Toronto, Canada

\*HMRI Post Doctoral Research Fellow

# Mainstream Media

- Main source of health information
- Impact on health literacy
- Need to assess quality of content



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**featured articles**

**"Drug helps to curb the sweet cravings"**

Sydney Morning Herald  
18 Jul 2010

Rating: ★★☆☆☆ (1½ stars)

AUSTRALIAN researchers have developed a drug that may combat overeating by making sweet food less pleasurable.

[read more](#)



**"A vaccine treatment undergoing testing could halt and shrink aggressive cancers"**



Daily Telegraph  
12 Jul 2010

Rating: ★★★☆☆ (2½ stars)

AN injection to help kill off the most deadly cancers, including breast, bowel and cervical tumours, has been created by scientists.

[read more](#)

**"Botox injections to be used to treat migraine headaches"**



The Courier Mail  
11 Jul 2010

Rating: ★★★☆☆ (3 stars)

BOTOX shots, cosmetic injections typically used to smooth facial wrinkles, will now be able to help patients in the UK who suffer from debilitating headaches.

[read more](#)

**news**

There are currently no news items.

**what media doctor is**

Media Doctor is a website dedicated to improving the accuracy of media reports about new medical treatments.

Media Doctor reviews current news items about medical treatments, assesses their quality using a standardised rating scale and presents reviews of good and bad examples of reports on this website. It is anticipated that these independent and objective critiques will improve journalistic practices in reporting new medications and treatments in Australia.

[Read more about our site >>](#)

**what media doctor is not**

Media Doctor does not provide medical advice, and does not assess the quality of the evidence on which the stories are based; instead we concentrate on the articles themselves. For more information on the treatments featured on this site, visit our links page.



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**Source:** Sydney Morning Herald  
**Published:** 18 Jul 2010  
**Category:** Pharmaceutical  
**Rating:** ★★☆☆☆ (1½ stars)



**what they said** (Hover the mouse cursor over underlined words for more info)

AUSTRALIAN researchers have developed a drug that may combat overeating by making sweet food less pleasurable.

The original article can be found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/wellbeing/drug-helps-to-curb-the-sweet-cravings-20100717-10f59.html>

**how did it rate?** ([more information](#))

Criteria	Rating
Novelty of Treatment	Not Satisfactory (?)
Availability of Treatment	Satisfactory (?)
Treatment Options	Not Satisfactory (?)
Disease Mongering	Satisfactory (?)
Evidence	Not Satisfactory (?)
Quantification of Benefits of Treatment	Not Satisfactory (?)
Harms of Treatment	Not Satisfactory (?)
Costs of Treatment	Not Satisfactory (?)
Sources of Information	Not Satisfactory (?)
Relies on Press Release	Not Applicable
<b>Total Score</b>	<b>2 of 9</b>

**what we said** (Hover the mouse cursor over underlined words for more info)

Unfortunately this news story reads more like a promotional piece perhaps coinciding with the company's application to the FDA?

# [mediadoctor.org.au](http://mediadoctor.org.au)

- Tool for assessing and improving quality of health reporting in Australian media
- Launched 2004 – present

# Analysis

- Items rated satisfactory were calculated and aggregated:
  - Across outlets
  - By story types
  - Over time
  - By journalist type

# Statistical analysis

- Data normally distributed

We compared:

- Unweighted cumulative scores between media outlets (ANOVA)
- Item and total scores for online and print media
- Proportion of 'S' criteria across outlet - Fisher's exact test

# Results

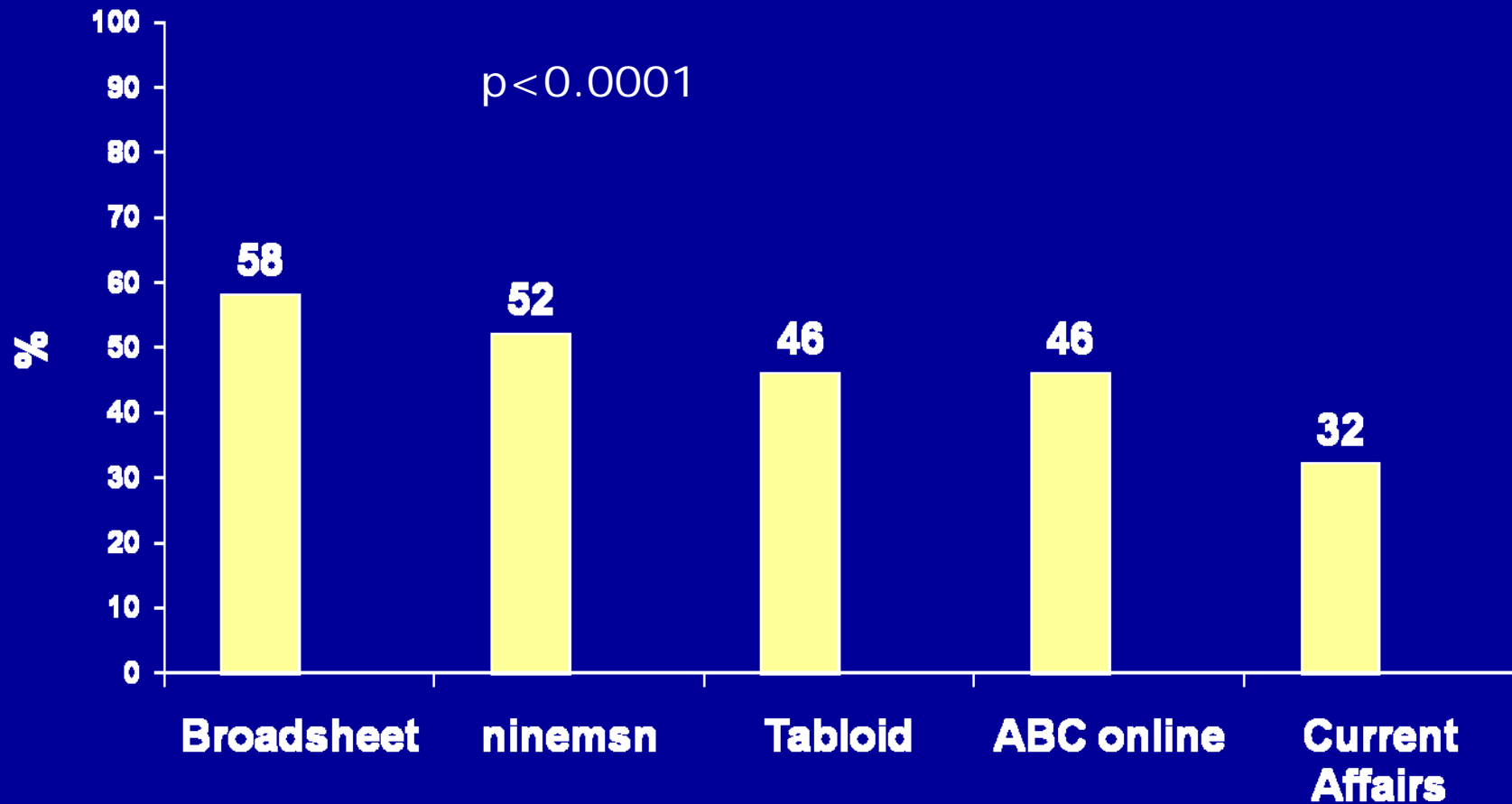
## Categories:

	Stories	(%)	Score
• Surgical	132	(9)	50
• Pharmaceutical	732	(49)	53
• Diagnostic tests	158	(10)	49
• 'Other' interventions	424	(28)	50
• CAM	35	(2)	40
• Adverse Events	26	(2)	56

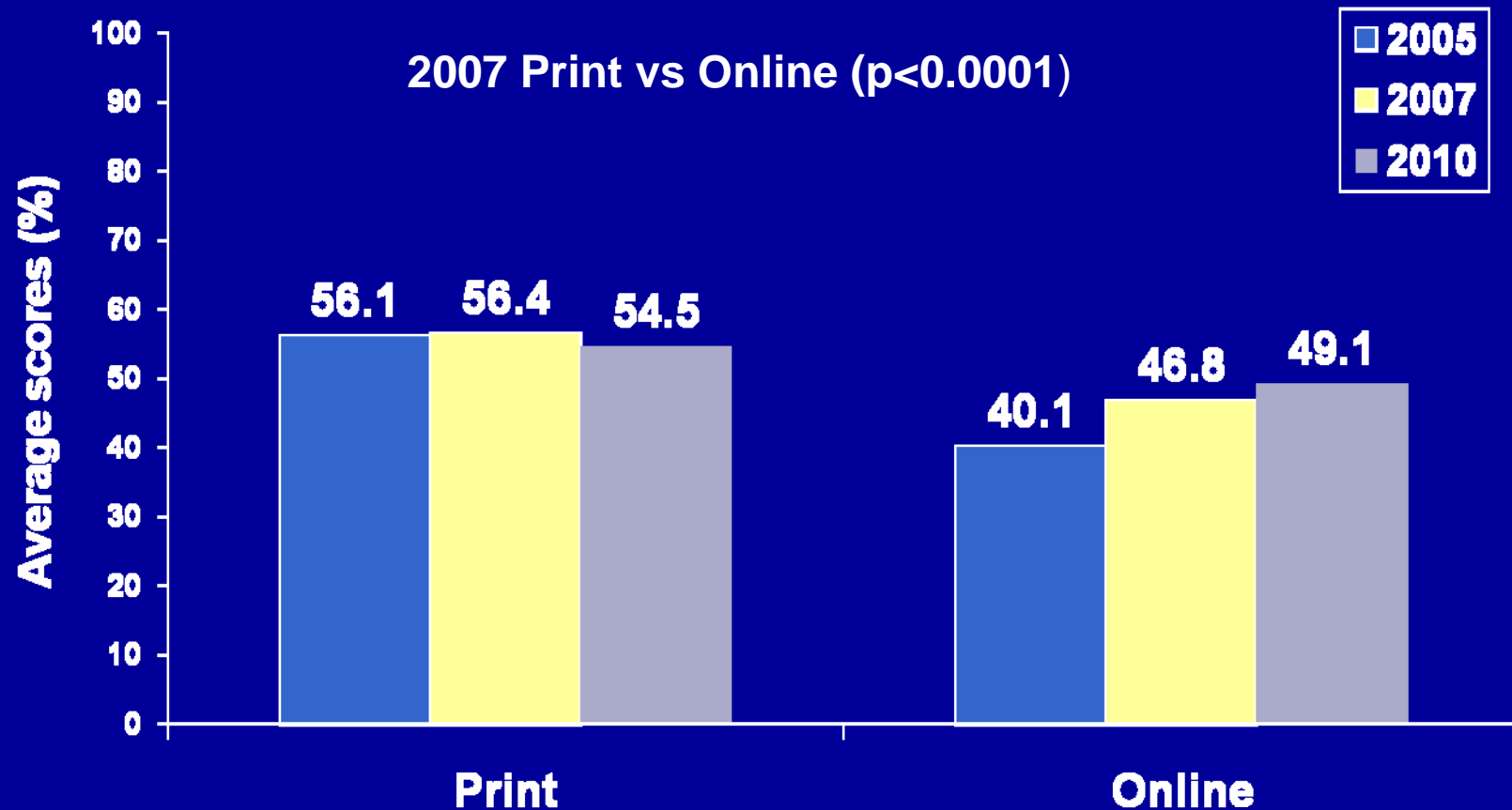
# Average Score Pool

- 2005 - 51% (95% CI 50-52%)
- 2010 - 52% (95% CI 51-53%)

# Comparing Media Outlets



# Print versus Online Over Time



# Rating Items

## High scoring

- Novelty\*
- Disease mongering

## Low Scoring

- Evidence
- Benefits\*
- Costs
- Harms
- Sources
- Treatment options\*

\*  $p = 0.001$

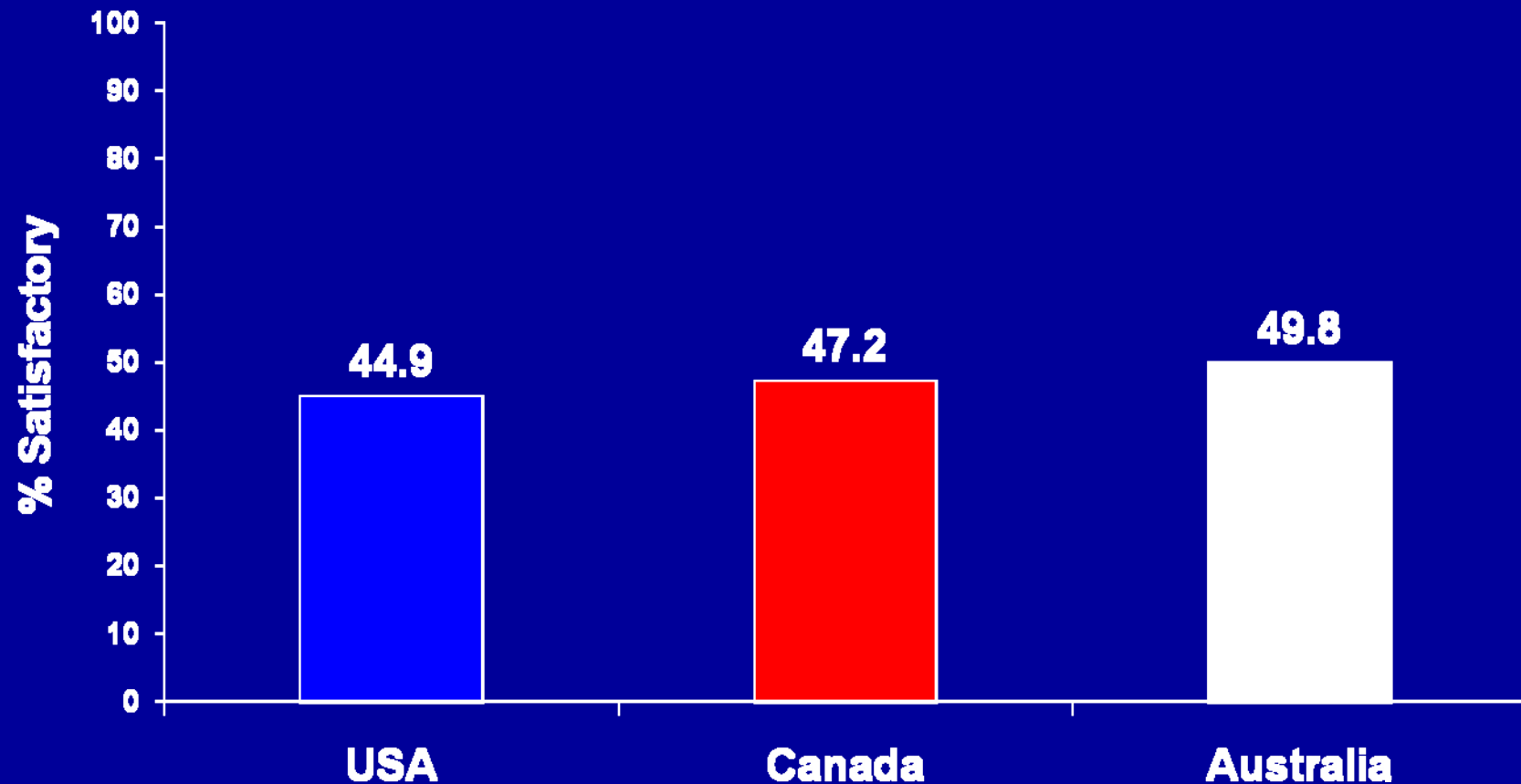
# Journalist Category

- *No By-line*
- *General Journalist* – no reporting specialty
- *Overseas Media* – story imported from overseas
- *News Agencies* – eg AP, Reuters
- *Health Journalist* – ‘health’ ‘medical’ or ‘science’ reporter
- *Specialist Health Journalist* – Health Journalists with  $\geq 10$  stories on the Media Doctor site

# Journalist Scores

<b>Journalist Category</b>	<b>N = Stories</b>	<b>Average Score</b>	<b>95% CI</b>
No by-line	320	44	42-46
General	193	45	42-48
OS Media	39	51	44-57
News Agency	415	55	53-57
Health	142	56	53-60
Specialist Health	228	60	57-63

# International Comparison



- If this is representative, large sections of the population are being poorly informed or misinformed about treatments that potentially affect them and their families. This presents a challenge for all of us: media, government, science and medical journals and the researchers themselves.

# Conclusions

- Australian health news generally poor
- Best information from specialist health journalists and broadsheet newspapers
- Weakest information from no by-lines and TV current affairs

# Policy Implications

- Poor health news = poor health literacy
- Common policies on media engagement
- Press release guidelines including:
  - Novelty of the research
  - Availability - early stage research may never evolve
  - Level of evidence presented, study design, n=
  - Benefits or risks quantified in absolute terms
  - Industry links and funding included
  - More researchers and independent experts available to provide comment to journalists

# References

- MJA 2005 Smith et al
- PLoS One 2008 Bonevski et al
- PLoS One 2009 Wilson et al
- PLoS Med 2010 Wilson et al (In Press)

# Site Usage

Jul 1, 2010 - Jul 31, 2010

- 2,252 Visits
- 3,503 Page views
- 1.56 Pages/Visit
- 86.81% % New Visits