

Guidelines for reporting on health issues

The following guidelines were devised by PressWise, at the request of World Health Organisation (WHO) in Europe, in consultation with health communicators and correspondents from 51 European countries.

The first draft was presented to a meeting of the WHO European Health Communication Network (EHCN) in Moscow 1998, and was subsequently revised in consultation with the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and meetings of the EHCN in Denmark (1999) and Moldova (2000) before being adopted as a formal code by the WHO EHCN.

1. First, try to do no harm. Human rights and the public good are paramount.
2. Get it right. Check your facts and your sources, even if deadlines are put at risk.
3. Do not raise false hopes. Be especially careful when reporting on claims for 'miracle cures' or potential 'health scares'.
4. Beware of vested interests. Ask yourself 'who benefits most from this story?'
5. Reject personal inducements. Always make it clear if material is being published as a result of sponsorship.
6. Never disclose the source of information imparted in confidence.
7. Respect the privacy of the sick, the handicapped and their families at all times.
8. Be mindful of the consequences of your story. Remember that individuals who may be sick or handicapped - especially children - have lives to live long after the media have lost interest.
9. Never intrude on private grief. Respect the feelings of the bereaved, especially when dealing with disasters. Close-up photography or television images of victims or their families should be avoided wherever possible.
10. If in doubt, leave it out.