



## **Researchers Discover Media Giving Negative Slant for Life-Saving Opioid Treatments**

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Researchers analyzing media coverage of medications used to treat opioid addiction found inaccurate and negatively slanted coverage. This is especially concerning in states with high rates of overdose-related deaths.

Journalists play a vital role in the fight against the opioid epidemic because they serve as reliable communicators. Information is very important because addiction is a problem that is associated with a lot of stigmas. This stigma can keep addicted individuals from seeking the help they need. It has served as one of the biggest obstacles for addiction treatment and rehab.

But now that addiction is being treated as a medical condition, more and more people are reaching out and trying to get sober again. Journalists have the responsibility to spread the correct information to the public.

When it comes to covering a public health emergency as complex as overdose deaths, a new study published in Health Affairs shows that journalists aren't always reliable messengers.

Researchers from Johns Hopkins University and the University of Minnesota coded 300 news clips and broadcasts published between 2007 and 2016 for accurate and inaccurate messages about FDA-approved medications used to treat opioid use disorder, namely methadone, buprenorphine, and naltrexone.

The sample includes 171 local news clips from states with high overdose mortality rates during the study's time window, including Ohio and New Hampshire. It also included 19 clips from national outlets like the Wall Street Journal and The New York Times, as well as broadcast transcripts ranging from Fox News to PBS.

Medications can help keep people engaged in treatment. It works better than traditional abstinence-based approaches that rely on group therapy. However, there is a common belief that using medications during treatment is only substituting one addiction for another.

But these medications can significantly reduce a person's risk of fatal overdose. Patients receiving these life-saving treatments reduce their risk of opioid overdose by 50 percent. Therefore, the misconception that medication-assisted therapy is just as bad as addiction is dangerous. [Click the link to see Lexington's top rehab placement programs.](#)

However, media coverage of these medications is a mixed bag. A New York Times article from 2013, for example, describes the medicine as another form of "dope".

The Health Affairs study found that only a quarter of the 300 news stories sampled described the medications as effective. Their efficacy was absent from coverage, as was the fact that they are severely underutilized. Fewer than 40 percent of the articles reviewed mentioned that these medications are inaccessible and under-prescribed. Meanwhile, only four percent of the articles identified stigma as a barrier to access.

"As an addiction medicine physician, I would say that stigma and persistent misunderstanding about the role of medication for opioid use disorder is one of the biggest, if not the single greatest, barriers to ensuring people have access to these treatments," said Dr. Sarah Wakeman, medical director at Harvard's Mass General Hospital Substance Use Disorder Initiative.

The researchers also found that the negative coverage was more common among local news outlets with high overdose rates than among national outlets.

Of the 171 local news articles sampled, 51 percent mentioned at least one negative consequence of using these drugs, whereas 36 percent of the 129 national articles mentioned negative consequences. But it is important to remember that every drug has side effects, including beneficial ones. These side effects ought to be reported.

However, the medications are framed in a much more sinister way, to show that they are deadly?further stigmatizing medication-assisted therapies. Reporters focus on negative consequences, stepping into the realm of misinformation. Reporters with a more nuanced perspective avoid misplaced fears and false equivalence.

A 2016 New York Times opinion piece had the headline "Addicted to a Treatment for Addiction," while describing a patient who used the medications over long periods of time. In fact, most addicted individuals take a long time to get better, so describing them as addicted to the treatment is blatant misinformation.

The reason why local news played up negative consequences more often than national news was beyond the scope of the study. In any case, journalists must be able to portray both the negative consequences and the reasons why these medications work?without bias or prejudice?so that the public will not be vulnerable to misunderstanding.

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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