

Introduction

Information disseminated by the media influences not only individual health behaviour, but also healthcare utilization and health policies. Internationally, the news media are an important source of information on medicine and new medical treatments for readers, including physicians and scientists.⁷ There are concerns that the selection of topics, and consequently the coverage, may not:

- always be accurate.¹
- depict the real achievements in medicine described in the literature;²
- cover the real needs of the patient;
- correspond to the need of the reader (the so-called agenda).⁵

The international position is also representative of Italy.⁶ A good journalist has to be able to access the latest information (the sources), analyse and filter it, assessing its quality and authoritativeness, whilst dealing with ever-increasing sources of information.¹⁰ While the impact factor gives a partial picture of the scientific importance of a given medical journal,¹¹ the criteria for filtering medical evidence likely to become 'news' are less stringent. The criteria are discretionary and connected to the 'values' of journalism (singularity, practical importance, consequences on life, geographical implications, emotions, possibility of development, sense of expectation).

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The annual increase in the amount of published research poses major difficulties. Overall results of research are increasing by 5% per year, published pages by 7-8% per year and the total of number of journals 12000 to 20 000 (equal to 1-2 million of articles depending on the evaluation criteria).¹²

Journalists are also faced with time constraints¹³ which make it difficult for them to scan even a few scientific journals.

The research agenda of our Centre is to analyse communication to different target groups in order to improve the quality of information on health. A pilot project commenced aimed at providing alerts to papers on medical topics from the scientific literature. This was in response to requests made by some Italian scientific journalists at a press conference. The need they expressed was clearly consistent with our objectives.

Materials and methods

The alerting service was designed using predefined criteria as far as possible. Medical journals were selected on the basis of their impact factor. In the years 2001-2003, the selection of papers was discretionary or based on their editorial comments. In 2004 and 2005, various publisher's press alerts were available. Articles were selected when they had received an editorial comment or had been mentioned in the original press alerts from publishers. Particular attention was given to Italian authors. All papers on medicine published in *Nature* and *Science* were alerted (in view of the interest indicated by our 'Observatory of the lay

press' -see below) and full papers available on the web were considered.

Tables of contents were drawn up from subscriptions to email services provided by publishers; these were assessed by a biomedical graduate, formally trained with a master's degree in scientific communication and journalism. Alerts were based on the timely publication of selected titles