

# Media reporting of global health issues and events in New Zealand daily newspapers

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## Introduction

Global health has received considerable attention over the past 20 years, with increased investment from some governments, non-government organisations (NGOs) and private philanthropists (e.g. the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation).<sup>1</sup> Despite the financial and government responses to global health inequities, the distribution of resources remains disproportionately clustered in developed, higher income countries, where only 16% of the world's population lives.<sup>2,3</sup> As demonstrated by the Global Burden of Disease project, the burden of mortality and morbidity is disproportionately borne by low and middle income countries (LMICs).<sup>4</sup>

There is a large body of research into the news media's role in shaping social and political opinion.<sup>5</sup> Despite concerns about the adverse effects of media on a range of (anti) social behaviours, the news media are considered a useful vehicle for stimulating awareness of health concerns.<sup>6-8</sup> There may be a growing public appetite for global health-related stories and these stories can boost advocacy efforts to increase government involvement in global health issues.<sup>9</sup> This study aims to address the following questions: how are global health issues represented in mainstream newspapers in New Zealand?; and, to what extent do these representations match the main causes of morbidity and mortality according to the Global Burden of Disease report?

## Methods

We conducted a content analysis of global health issues as reported in four of the major New Zealand metropolitan newspapers over a two-year period 2007-2009 (selected for analysis from average nett circulation figures). The sample included *The New Zealand Herald*, *the Waikato Times*, *The Press* and *The Dominion Post*. Newspaper circulation figures were sourced from the New Zealand Audit Bureau of Circulations Inc. (<http://newspaper.abc.org.nz/audit.html>).

The rationale and framework that underpins this study is adapted from early work by Clegg-Smith and colleagues,<sup>10</sup> who designed a framework to track and assess the diversity in press coverage of tobacco issues. This approach allows a quantitative content analysis of the frequency of specific types of stories and a qualitative analysis of text within each story. Data in the form of news clips (reports and editorial) were accessed through the Newztext online database,<sup>11</sup> which catalogues all newspaper articles released by news sources owned by Fairfax Media. This database was searched for the period 1 June 2007 to 31 May 2009 inclusive, using the terms 'global health', 'international health' and 'world health'. All articles identified were appraised for source of information; attribution focus (individual, organisational, national or international) and framing focus (positive, negative or neutral). A 'positive' label was attached to articles where the content of the news item was presented in a constructive or

## Abstract

**Issue Addressed:** In the context of a globalised world, reports on health that extend personal or country borders have increasing relevance. Media can promote opportunities to identify and address gaps in important global health issues. In light of the potential role of media as an advocacy tool for global health, we examined how global health issues are represented in mainstream media in New Zealand.

**Methods:** We conducted a content analysis of media reports on global health issues in the four highest circulation newspapers in New Zealand between June 2007 and May 2009. Search terms included 'global health', 'international health' and 'world health'.

**Results:** Communicable disease was the most frequently reported global health issue in New Zealand newspapers, followed by environment (e.g. climate change), general health risks (unsafe pharmaceuticals) and substance use (tobacco and alcohol). Chronic disease, injury or their determinants were less frequently reported.

**Conclusions:** Mainstream media favours health-related reports based on crisis, epidemic or acute conditions over chronic or non-communicable diseases or disability. Health issues facing the Asia Pacific region increasingly include chronic diseases, which would benefit from greater media coverage to increase advocacy and political awareness of global health challenges.

**Key words:** media, global, health, reporting, equity

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## So what?

Influencing policy and investment in global health partly relies upon an informed public. This brief report indicates there are missed opportunities to promote greater awareness of health challenges facing developing countries through major newspapers in New Zealand.

'optimistic' tone as opposed to a 'negative' (cautionary or blame attribution) or 'neutral' (fact description). Data were entered into an Excel database for content analysis in which proportional representation of each of the categories are reported.

Inter-coder reliability was tested by two of the members of the research team reading the same articles, coding them and then checking the consistency of appraisals. Five articles were tested for coding agreement but no correlation or Kappa analysis was conducted. Where differences in appraisals were identified between the coders, an agreement on a standard code description was made.

**Results**

Of the 61,509 articles in the Newztext database published by the four newspapers during the two-year study period commencing on 1 June 2007, 367 articles met the study eligibility criteria. Almost a third of these articles (121; 33%) reported on issues related to communicable disease. In total, 92 articles that were dedicated to the spread, experience and management of communicable diseases were published between 22 April 2009 and 27 May 2009, representing 25% of all articles analysed in this study. The most frequently-reported communicable disease during this period was influenza A(H1N1).

Other global health issues that frequently featured in the daily press included: environmental health, for example climate change effects on health (48 articles); general health risks, for example unsafe food products (29 articles); substance use, for example, tobacco, illicit drugs

and alcohol (26 articles); and international relations, for example war refugees (24 articles).

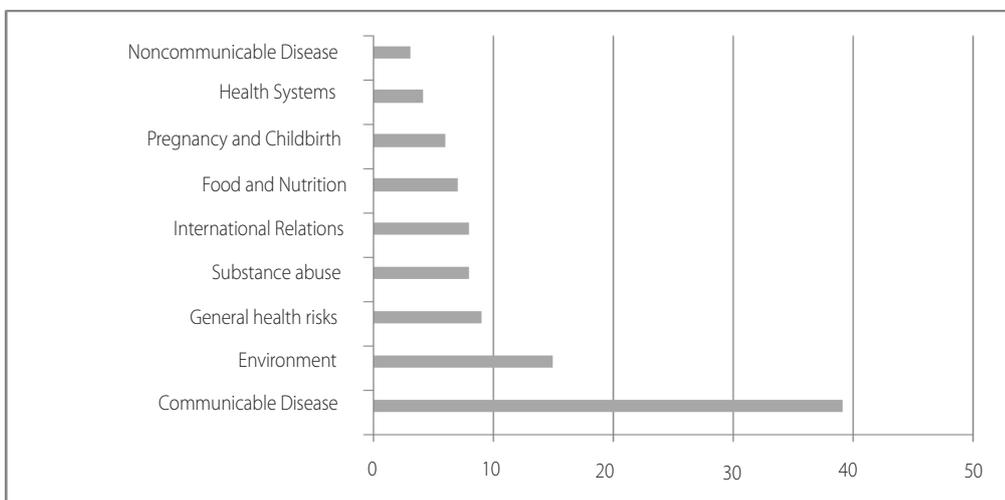
The majority of the articles analysed reported from a blame attribution slant, with fewer written in neutral (fact description) or positive tone (see Table 1). Attribution of the causes of, or reactions to, global health issues were more likely to frame a global health event (such as the influenza A(H1N1) pandemic) from a New Zealand perspective (102 articles, 44%), fewer framed the issue from an international perspective (87 articles, 23%), while 80 articles (22%) focused on the response to global health issues from an individual perspective (e.g. Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director General). Overall, 97 articles (26%) framed global health issues in terms of the actions of an organisation or the impact upon an organisation.

**Discussion**

Communicable disease, in particular the A(H1N1) virus, was the most frequently reported global health issue featured in New Zealand newspapers between June 2007 and May 2009. Reports on non-communicable disease or injury (or risk factors), were less likely to be reported during this period. New Zealand newspaper reports on global health issues were only partially representative of the burden of disease and disability, particularly within our Asia Pacific region.<sup>12</sup> Although communicable diseases remain a critical issue for health within low and middle income countries, accounting for at least 26% of the 57 million deaths worldwide in 2002,<sup>4</sup> the focus of the majority of articles in this category in our review related to

**Table 1: Tone and perspective identified in newspaper reports of global health issues .**

Article characteristic	Example headlines	Number (%) n=279
<b>Tone</b>		
Negative, cautionary or blaming	WHO Accuses Samoa Of Ignoring Typhoid	234 (63.5%)
Neutral	Injecting Affordable Cure To Most Needy	73 (24%)
Positive	Pacific Island Team Gets Tactical Help	57 (15.5%)
<b>Perspective</b>		
International	Taiwan Gets WHO Chance	88 (24%)
National	Children To Be Stopped From Buying Cigarettes In Samoa	102 (44%)
Organisation	Lisa Cescon: Memo to Minister – Don't Bite the Hand That Needs You	97 (26%)
Individual	Anthony Doesburg: Radiation Risks – Real Or Imagined?	80 (22%)



**Figure 1: Proportion of global health reports addressing different topics in New Zealand newspapers between June 2007 and May 2009 by topic (n=367).**

the influenza epidemic. The relative neglect of topics relating to non-communicable diseases is inconsistent with the estimated burden of chronic conditions.<sup>13,14</sup> Similarly, other global health issues, in particular maternal and child health, environmental health and road traffic injuries were relatively infrequently reported, despite their regional importance. A study by Verma (2009) also found that chronic disease and injury and their 'upstream' determinants were under-represented in the sample of UK national newspapers, despite their dominance in terms of disability and mortality.<sup>6</sup>

Media reporting on health is particularly high during public health emergency responses such as the influenza A(H1N1) pandemic or other acute humanitarian crises.<sup>8,15-17</sup> Following a humanitarian crisis, the media is highly adept at drawing the public into the action, and the impact can be registered in terms of private donations to relief organisations. Reporting on the less dramatic, but similarly devastating, chronic health issues, remains much less common.

Limitations of this study are important to note. In particular, the study design and method of selection of news clips (including the search terms; 'global health', 'international health' and 'world health') may inadvertently exclude those which refer to global health issues but reflect them in a local context (e.g. motor vehicle crashes). In the future we would search for the lay or more commonly used equivalents for journalist media which might include terms such as 'developing countries'; 'poverty', and 'aid'. We are also aware that the outbreak of A(H1N1) was made public as from 24 April 2009, and our sampling of print media continued until 31 May 2009. It was evident that this episode contributed to a higher-than-usual reporting on communicable diseases. Our analysis did not consider cross-cutting themes that may cross topic boundaries (e.g. health systems, infrastructure and funding). Our sources of media were limited to national newspapers and did not take account of the representation of global health issues on television, radio and other media.

How media is constructed and consumed (and interpreted) by audiences remains a key health topic. Applied to the emerging discipline of global health, it has potential to inform how we use media to convey messages to a broad audience on issues of global relevance. The challenge is to create a connection with the reader through 'story-telling'; the critical element of news items that provides the 'hook' for readers.<sup>18</sup> Despite the New Zealand Government's modest contribution to overseas development assistance (ODA) (currently at 0.3% of the 0.7% target for OECD countries), private donations through non-governmental organisations are among the highest among OECD countries per capita, which may reflect a willingness to engage with both acute and pervasive global health and development situations.

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