

# Is Any Press Good Press? The Impact of Media Portrayals of Infertility on Young Adults' Perceptions of Infertility

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## Abstract

**Objective:** Infertility is an issue of current concern across North America. The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada advocates for public education regarding infertility issues. Public education is supposed to be a fundamental objective of news media. However, it is uncertain whether the media are acting as good partners to the medical profession in this objective of educating the public, and young women in particular. Recent findings suggest that print news tends to present infertility using high-alarm framing strategies; however, the impact of this framing on news consumers is unknown. The purpose of this study was to understand the effects of high- versus low-alarm frames on consumers of infertility-related news.

**Methods:** In this experiment, 131 undergraduate students were randomly assigned to read infertility-focused news articles judged to employ either high- or low-alarm framing strategies in presenting infertility. Participants subsequently completed various psychological, emotional, and knowledge measures to gauge the impact of the news exposure.

**Results:** The participants exposed to the high-alarm framing showed higher levels of perceived personal susceptibility to infertility, marginally higher levels of worry about infertility, and significantly lower levels of infertility-related knowledge than those exposed to the low-alarm framing.

**Conclusion:** The manner in which the news media report on infertility has repercussions on how individuals think and feel about infertility. The findings of this study can inform health care providers about how the media are shaping perceptions of infertility, and can assist professional bodies interested in undertaking public education initiatives.

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## Résumé

**Objectif :** L'infertilité suscite bien des préoccupations de nos jours en Amérique du Nord. La Société des obstétriciens et gynécologues du Canada préconise la mise en œuvre d'efforts visant la sensibilisation du public à l'égard des questions entourant l'infertilité. Bien que la sensibilisation du public constitue, en principe, l'un des objectifs fondamentaux des médias d'information, la question de savoir si ces derniers collaborent de façon efficace avec la profession médicale à cet égard (et plus particulièrement en ce qui concerne la sensibilisation des jeunes femmes) demeure trouble. De récentes études semblent indiquer que la presse écrite tend à utiliser des stratégies grandement alarmistes en ce qui concerne la communication des nouvelles traitant de l'infertilité; cependant, les effets de ces stratégies sur le public demeurent inconnus. Cette étude avait pour objectif de comparer et de comprendre les effets des stratégies de communication grandement alarmistes et peu alarmistes sur le public visé par les nouvelles traitant de l'infertilité.

**Méthodes :** Dans le cadre de cette expérience, 131 étudiants de premier cycle ont été affectés au hasard à un groupe devant lire des articles de journaux qui, à notre avis, utilisaient des stratégies de communication grandement alarmistes pour aborder le sujet de l'infertilité ou à un groupe devant lire des articles de journaux qui, à notre avis, utilisaient des stratégies peu alarmistes pour aborder ce sujet. Les participants ont par la suite rempli un questionnaire mesurant divers paramètres psychologiques, affectifs et liés aux connaissances, et ce, pour nous permettre d'évaluer les effets de l'exposition à chacun de ces types de nouvelles.

**Résultats :** Les participants qui ont été exposés à des stratégies de communication grandement alarmistes ont présenté des taux accrus de sensibilité personnelle perçue à l'infertilité, des taux légèrement accrus d'inquiétude envers l'infertilité et des niveaux considérablement moindres de connaissances à l'égard de l'infertilité, par comparaison avec les participants ayant été exposés à des stratégies de communication peu alarmistes.

**Conclusion :** La façon dont les médias d'information traitent de la question de l'infertilité exerce une influence sur la façon dont les gens perçoivent les renseignements qui leur sont fournis à ce sujet. Les résultats de cette étude pourraient renseigner les fournisseurs de soins de santé quant à la façon dont les médias influencent les perceptions en ce qui concerne l'infertilité et pourraient s'avérer utiles pour les organismes professionnels qui souhaitent mettre en œuvre des initiatives d'éducation publique.

## INTRODUCTION

Infertility is an issue of concern across North America.<sup>1,2</sup> Infertility, as currently defined by the medical community, is the inability to conceive after one year of regular unprotected intercourse.<sup>3</sup> Although prevalence estimates for infertility vary depending on the definition used for measurement,<sup>1,4</sup> between 11.5% and 15% of Canadian couples<sup>1</sup> and 7% to 15.5% of women in the United States experience infertility,<sup>4</sup> according to recent statistics. Worldwide, approximately 1.9% of women experience primary infertility (the inability to conceive a first child), while 10.5% of women experience secondary infertility (the inability to conceive when one has previously conceived).<sup>2</sup>

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada outlines in their strategic plan<sup>5</sup> that public education is one of their top priorities. They plan to maintain their role as the preferred source for women and the media when it comes to issues of obstetrics and gynaecology. However, whether the Canadian media are facilitating or hindering medical professionals who are working towards the goals of public education and increased knowledge about reproductive health issues is unknown. Depending on how the media use and frame information provided to them by the SOGC and other health professionals, they may or may not be advancing public education on reproductive health issues.

Canadian newspapers have been reporting an increase in the rate of infertility for the past 30 years. In 1979 a *Globe and Mail* headline read “Is Infertility on Increase?”<sup>6</sup>; in 1986 a *Toronto Star* headline read “Infertility on Increase, Doctors Say”<sup>7</sup>; in 1994, the *Edmonton Journal* reported an “Alarming Rise in Infertility World Wide”<sup>8</sup>; and in 2012 the *National Post* reported “Infertility on Rise in Canada; Double since 1992.”<sup>9</sup> An increase in infertility is of widespread public interest, and it is not surprising that it receives media attention. However, given the potential power of the media to influence public perceptions of, and reactions to, an issue, it is important to critically examine the effects of media coverage. Family physicians, obstetrician-gynaecologists, counsellors, and other health professionals may benefit from knowing how their patients are affected by the news they consume about infertility, particularly with respect to their perceptions of personal risk of experiencing infertility. The present study explores how approaches to reporting on infertility, evident in mainstream Canadian newspapers, influence news consumers.

News coverage of health issues often contains a lack of detailed health information,<sup>10</sup> fails to include other sources of information on the topic at hand,<sup>11</sup> and creates

an impression of a more concrete understanding of the issue than is currently scientifically accepted.<sup>12</sup> Further, news media coverage regarding health issues is often not in proportion to the actual prevalence of that health issue. For instance, the news media tend to relay far more information pertaining to sensationalized, albeit relatively rare, health issues (e.g., SARS or West Nile virus), than about issues with higher population prevalence (e.g., heart disease or diabetes).<sup>13</sup> Even within disease categories, media coverage is often disproportional to prevalence. For example, approximately 45% of cancer-related news has been found to focus on breast cancer, while only 5% concentrates on lung cancer, even though the prevalence of lung cancer is substantially higher.<sup>13</sup>

Consumers of news coverage of health studies often lack an understanding of the fundamental concepts of health risk assessment (e.g., prevalence vs. incidence), and tend not to think critically about health issues.<sup>14</sup> This, paired with the often incomplete reporting of health issues in the news, may leave these news consumers with a limited ability to “evaluate the quality of medical or scientific studies, weigh the value or contribution of a single scientific or medical study or understand and interpret risk probabilities, especially with very small probabilities and unfamiliar risks.”<sup>14</sup> This can lead to meaningful behavioural consequences. For instance, when controlled for the number of actual cases of influenza, the amount of news coverage of the virus has been found to predict physician visits for influenza.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that seeking health information from media sources can lead to escalations of medical concerns and may lead to anxiety and unnecessary appointments with medical professionals.<sup>16</sup> Together, these results demonstrate that the news media often do not portray health issues in a way that accurately educates, informs, or empowers the general public and that the media’s portrayals may inadvertently work counter to the goals of medical professionals.

The way the media frames issues can also affect how members of the public interpret those issues and how they behave subsequently. “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation.”<sup>17</sup> Journalists rely on frames to create meaningful events or stories; the frame is “the central, organising idea . . . [that] suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue.”<sup>18</sup> The frame then becomes a working routine for journalists, and it allows them to interpret a new event as another part of the greater story on the issue.<sup>19</sup> Frames

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