

Discourses of disease: Representations of tuberculosis within New Zealand newspapers 2002–2004[☆]

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the ways that tuberculosis (TB) has been represented in the print media in New Zealand over recent years (2002–2004). Our broad contention is that, notwithstanding its biomedical reality, TB is socially constructed by, and through, human experience. Further, public health practitioners depend, to a large extent, on the media to alert the public to threats of disease and opportunities for protection. However, the messages conveyed are sometimes neither helpful nor accurate. In our analysis of TB coverage in three major daily newspapers in New Zealand, we enumerate and classify references to the disease, as well as undertake a discursive analysis of the revealed themes. Of the 366 texts we retrieved in the database search, we selected 120 for in-depth analysis. Our examination indicated the importance of bovine TB within the national consciousness, the stigmatised character of TB and the association between TB and immigrants. We observe that newspaper ‘stories’ in general, and commentaries by public health officials in particular, are invariably offered on a ‘case by case’ basis. We conclude that this specificity in time and place avoids more challenging discourses linking TB with deeply embedded determinants of health such as the strong link between TB and poverty.

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Introduction

While medical researchers benefit from the media publicising their work, public health practitioners

frequently depend on the media to alert the public to threats of disease and opportunities for protection. Both forms of dissemination can result in the print media granting a prominence to medical matters that is seldom matched by the attention afforded to wider determinants of health (Friedman, 2004). In this regard, media focus on biomedical issues reflects societal preoccupations with allocation of the ‘vast majority’ of funding for health research to biomedical work, ‘despite the fact that a complex interplay of factors influences vulnerability and resistance to disease’ (Institute of Medicine, 2006, p. 18). In this paper, we focus

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on media representations of tuberculosis (TB) which continues to be one of the world's most formidable public health problems, despite the availability of effective treatment since the 1950s. Approximately one-third of the world's population is infected with the TB bacillus and an estimated 2,000,000 people die from the disease each year (WHO, 2005).

Using newspaper texts as a case study, we consider the way in which the media constitutes and transforms the public meaning and significance of TB. As part of a larger research project examining TB in New Zealand (Farmer, Herring, Littleton, & Park, 2007), this paper analyses representations and discourses of TB within the major daily newspapers in New Zealand's three largest cities. Given the highly politicised environment of infectious disease, we ask 'how is the New Zealand print media shaping discourse about TB, especially in terms of privileging biomedical domains and individualizing and racialising the disease?'

Like HIV and many other infectious diseases before it, TB is replete with meaning. The changing ways in which TB and people living with it have been portrayed in literature and news media have shaped the cultural meanings associated with this disease. These meanings, in turn, have the capacity to affect how TB is experienced (e.g. as a disease of the literati, or of the impoverished poor) (Bryder, 1988). As Lichtenstein (1996) commented in her review of AIDS iconography in the New Zealand media, stories about disease draw on pre-existing stereotypes, but can in turn reshape or challenge them. This view that disease shapes and is shaped by human experience draws from a constructionist premise that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by wider cultural, temporal and political factors. Additionally, this view contends that language is not merely a neutral means of communication but performs ideological work.

We begin by reviewing the historical and contemporary status of TB in New Zealand. Second, we examine the role of the media in current society and its influence on discourses concerning public health issues and, in particular, diseases such as TB. Third, we describe the data collection and analytic approaches of the study. We report our findings first by way of topic counts, then in terms of discourses evident within these topical treatments. We close with a discussion that reflects on the presences and absences within print coverage of TB during our study period.

Tuberculosis in New Zealand

It is unlikely that TB existed in New Zealand before the arrival of Europeans in the 19th century (Miles, 1997), but it was indisputably endemic within both European and Maori populations by the second half of the 19th century. Indeed many settlers suffering from TB had come from Britain to the colony specifically in the hope that the latter's climate would cure them (Bryder, 1996). Once it was established that TB was an infectious disease (1882), attempts were made by the government to restrict the entry of those suffering from it, although this was implemented in a relatively haphazard way. Early 20th century measures to combat TB followed overseas models, particularly Britain. These measures were based on the belief that fresh air, good food, exercise and rest were effective preventive and curative agents against the disease. BCG vaccination was developed in France in 1921, but, like Britain, New Zealand did not adopt it until after the Second World War (Bryder, 1999).

Following the Second World War more interventionist methods became available to treat and prevent TB. These methods included mass miniature radiography for early detection, BCG vaccination, and effective drugs, starting with streptomycin, developed in 1943. The Department of Health set up a Division of Tuberculosis in 1943, indicating a more proactive approach. From the 1950s to 1960s, TB was declining and it was believed that the problem would soon be 'conquered'. In 1969, 44% of all TB notifications were among Pacific Island peoples (Bryder, 1991) and in the 1970s, the Director-General of Health identified a new problem—the excessive proportion of cases occurring in immigrant populations. Much debate followed as to whether migrants brought the disease with them, or contracted it here because of their poor living conditions. TB has long been known as a disease of poverty, and with the downturn in the New Zealand economy in the latter part of the 20th century, the incidence increased, particularly among lower socio-economic groups, notably Maori and Pacific Island peoples, though rates remained far below the 1950s levels (Bryder, 1991).

A form of the disease that has long been a problem for animal and human health is bovine TB. Introduced and now feral animals such as possums, goats and ferrets provide reservoirs for the disease. Although still a concern for the pastoral industry, herd testing, pasteurisation of milk and good animal

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