
Certificate in Medical Journalism

Ethics in Medical Journalism

Accuracy – Related terms: precision, factual correctness

A journalist's responsibility to present data, statistics, and statements exactly as they appear in source material, without distortion. In medical journalism, this means quoting study results, dosage information, and risk percentages without alteration.

Example: Reporting that a trial showed a 22% reduction in mortality, not "significant improvement."

Practical application: Double-check numbers against original publications, use reputable databases, and employ peer review before publication.

Challenges: Complex statistical language, pressure to simplify figures, and the risk of inadvertent rounding errors.

Affiliation Disclosure – Related terms: conflict of interest, transparency

The practice of revealing any institutional, financial, or personal connections a journalist has with entities relevant to the story.

Example: Stating that a reporter received a research grant from a pharmaceutical company whose drug is under review.

Practical application: Include a disclosure statement at the beginning or end of each article; maintain a personal log of all affiliations.

Challenges: Hidden ties, varying journal policies, and the perception that disclosures may bias readers.

Authorship – Related terms: contributorship, byline

Determining who qualifies for credit in a medical news piece, based on substantial contributions to conception, writing, and revision.

Example: A senior editor who rewrites a draft for clarity may be listed as a co-author if they added intellectual content.

Practical application: Follow guidelines such as ICMJE criteria; document each contributor's role.

Challenges: Pressure to add prestigious names, ghostwriting, and disputes over credit.

Bias – Related terms: selection bias, reporting bias

Systematic deviation from objective truth caused by the journalist's perspective, source selection, or editorial policies.

Example: Favoring studies that support a sponsor's product while ignoring contradictory evidence.

Practical application: Conduct balanced literature reviews, employ blind fact-checking, and solicit peer commentary.

Challenges: Personal beliefs, commercial pressures, and audience expectations.

Case Report – Related terms: clinical vignette, anecdotal evidence

A detailed narrative of a single patient's diagnosis, treatment, and outcome, often used to illustrate emerging trends.

Example: Describing a rare adverse reaction to a new anticoagulant.

Practical application: Verify patient consent, anonymize data, and contextualize the report within broader evidence.

Challenges: Overgeneralization, privacy concerns, and limited scientific weight.

Citation – Related terms: reference, source attribution

Providing precise bibliographic details that allow readers to locate the original research or data cited.

Example: Including DOI, journal name, volume, and page numbers for a referenced clinical trial.

Practical application: Use citation management software; adhere to a consistent style (e.g., Vancouver).

Challenges: Incomplete information, pay-walled sources, and citation errors.

Confidentiality – Related terms: privacy, HIPAA compliance

Obligation to protect patient identities and sensitive health information unless explicit consent is obtained.

Example: Reporting a hospital's infection rates without naming individual patients.

Practical application: Remove identifiers, obtain written releases, and consult legal counsel when uncertain.

Challenges: Balancing public interest with privacy, inadvertent leaks, and differing legal standards across jurisdictions.

Conflict of Interest (COI) – Related terms: financial ties, disclosure

Any personal or financial relationship that could influence a journalist's objectivity.

Example: A reporter who holds stock in a biotech firm covering that firm's product launch.

Practical application: Complete a COI questionnaire for each story; publish disclosures prominently.

Challenges: Hidden investments, indirect benefits, and the perception of bias even after disclosure.

Data Integrity – Related terms: data verification, reproducibility

Ensuring that the data presented in a story accurately reflects the original source without manipulation or omission.

Example: Reporting raw numbers from a registry study exactly as they appear in the dataset.

Practical application: Request original datasets, cross-check tables, and retain copies for audit.

Challenges: Proprietary data restrictions, large datasets, and time constraints.

Editorial Independence – Related terms: autonomy, separation of content and advertising

The freedom of journalists to make content decisions without undue influence from owners, advertisers, or sponsors.

Example: Rejecting a pharma-funded advert that conflicts with a news story's findings.

Practical application: Establish clear policies separating editorial and commercial departments; enforce firewalls.

Challenges: Revenue pressures, subtle sponsor influence, and blurred lines in digital platforms.

Evidence-Based Reporting – Related terms: EBM, systematic review

Using the hierarchy of scientific evidence (randomized trials, meta-analyses) to inform story content and conclusions.

Example: Prioritizing a double-blind RCT over a single-center case series when discussing a new therapy.

Practical application: Grade evidence using tools like GRADE; explicitly state the level of evidence.

Challenges: Limited high-quality studies, time-sensitive news cycles, and lay-audience comprehension.

Fact-Checking – Related terms: verification, source corroboration

Systematic process of confirming the truthfulness of statements, statistics, and quotations before publication.

Example: Cross-checking a claim about a drug's side-effect profile with the FDA label.

Practical application: Maintain a checklist, use multiple independent sources, and document verification steps.

Challenges: Rapid news turnover, inaccessible primary data, and reliance on secondary reporting.

Falsifiability – Related terms: scientific method, testability

The principle that a claim must be capable of being proven false through observation or experiment.

Example: Reporting that a treatment "cures all cases" without providing evidence that the claim can be disproven.

Practical application: Highlight whether a study's hypothesis is testable and whether results support or refute it.

Challenges: Over-simplified headlines, sensationalism, and lack of critical peer review.

Funding Source Disclosure – Related terms: grant acknowledgment, sponsor transparency

Identifying who financed the research or the journalist's investigative work.

Example: Noting that a clinical trial was funded by a government health agency versus a private corporation.

Practical application: Include funding information in the article's opening paragraph or sidebar.

Challenges: Complex funding chains, undisclosed industry support, and reader misinterpretation.

Harassment Policy – Related terms: workplace safety, editorial conduct

Guidelines that protect journalists from intimidation or coercion by sources, sponsors, or colleagues.

Example: A reporter refusing to be pressured by a pharmaceutical representative to alter data.

Practical application: Establish reporting mechanisms; train staff on handling aggressive source behavior.

Challenges: Power imbalances, fear of retaliation, and ambiguous boundaries.

Health Literacy – Related terms: patient education, plain language

The ability of the audience to obtain, process, and understand basic health information.

Example: Translating complex oncology trial results into lay-friendly terms without losing nuance.

Practical application: Use readability tools, incorporate visual aids, and test drafts with focus groups.

Challenges: Balancing scientific accuracy with simplicity, diverse audience backgrounds, and cultural sensitivities.

Informed Consent – Related terms: patient permission, ethical approval

Obtaining explicit permission from individuals before using their personal health information in a story.

Example: Securing a signed release from a patient featured in a feature article about a rare disease.

Practical application: Provide clear consent forms, explain intended use, and retain documentation.

Challenges: Language barriers, power differentials, and retrospective consent for archival material.

Integrity of Sources – Related terms: source reliability, credibility

Assessing whether a source is trustworthy, unbiased, and competent in the subject area.

Example: Preferring peer-reviewed journal authors over a company spokesperson for technical details.

Practical application: Conduct background checks, verify credentials, and cross-reference statements.

Challenges: Hidden agendas, limited access to primary experts, and reliance on secondary citations.

Journalistic Ethics – Related terms: code of conduct, professional standards

The collective set of moral principles guiding the behavior of reporters, editors, and publishers.

Example: Upholding truthfulness, minimizing harm, and acting independently.

Practical application: Adopt a recognized code (e.g., SPJ) and conduct regular ethics training.

Challenges: Conflicts between commercial interests and ethical duties, evolving digital norms.

Layperson Terminology – Related terms: plain language, jargon reduction

Choosing words that non-specialist readers can readily understand without sacrificing essential meaning.

Example: Replacing “myocardial infarction” with “heart attack.”

Practical application: Include glossaries, use analogies, and avoid unnecessary acronyms.

Challenges: Over-simplification, loss of technical nuance, and cultural variations in interpretation.

Media Literacy – Related terms: critical consumption, misinformation detection

The skill set enabling audiences to evaluate the credibility, bias, and intent of health news.

Example: Teaching readers how to spot cherry-picked data in a headline.

Practical application: Publish “how-to” guides, embed fact-check links, and encourage source verification.

Challenges: Information overload, echo chambers, and low baseline knowledge.

Medical Accuracy Review – Related terms: clinical validation, expert audit

A formal process where a qualified health professional verifies the scientific content of a story before release.

Example: A cardiologist reviewing an article on a new stent before publication.

Practical application: Establish a review panel, set turnaround times, and document reviewer comments.

Challenges: Scheduling constraints, reviewer availability, and potential for over-reliance on a single expert.

Medical Terminology – Related terms: clinical language, nosology

Standardized vocabulary used to describe diseases, procedures, and anatomical structures.

Example: Using “myasthenia gravis” rather than “muscle weakness disease.”

Practical application: Maintain an up-to-date glossary, cross-check with ICD codes, and provide definitions for readers.

Challenges: Rapid emergence of new terms, acronym proliferation, and cross-disciplinary confusion.

Meta-Analysis – Related terms: systematic review, pooled data

A statistical technique that combines results from multiple studies to derive a more precise estimate of effect.

Example: Summarizing the efficacy of a vaccine across ten randomized trials.

Practical application: Cite the meta-analysis, explain its methodology, and note heterogeneity.

Challenges: Misinterpretation of pooled results, methodological flaws, and lay-audience comprehension.

Misquotation – Related terms: inaccurate citation, distortion

Presenting a speaker's words in a way that changes the original meaning, either unintentionally or deliberately.

Example: Attributing to a researcher the claim that "the drug cures cancer" when they said "the drug shows promise."

Practical application: Record interviews, verify transcripts, and provide context for quotations.

Challenges: Editing for brevity, language barriers, and pressure to create catchy headlines.

Open Access – Related terms: free full-text, public domain

Research articles that are freely available to the public without subscription barriers.

Example: Using a PubMed Central article to source data for a news story.

Practical application: Prioritize open-access sources, link directly to full text, and respect licensing terms.

Challenges: Variable quality, predatory journals, and limited availability of recent high-impact studies.

Patient Advocacy – Related terms: patient voice, stakeholder engagement

Incorporating the perspectives and interests of patients into reporting, ensuring their experiences are represented accurately.

Example: Including a patient's testimony in a story about a chronic illness treatment pathway.

Practical application: Reach out to advocacy groups, verify consent, and balance anecdotal narratives with evidence.

Challenges: Potential bias, tokenism, and ensuring diverse representation.

Peer Review – Related terms: manuscript evaluation, editorial scrutiny

The process by which experts evaluate the scientific validity, methodology, and relevance of a study before publication.

Example: Relying on a peer-reviewed article as a primary source for a health news piece.

Practical application: Check that the journal's peer-review status is genuine, and note any editorial comments.

Challenges: Publication lag, predatory journals claiming peer review, and misinterpretation of reviewer critiques.

Press Release – Related terms: media kit, institutional communication

A document prepared by research institutions or companies to announce new findings to journalists.

Example: A university issuing a press release about a breakthrough gene-editing study.

Practical application: Treat press releases as starting points, verify claims independently, and seek primary data.

Challenges: Promotional tone, selective data presentation, and embargo violations.

Preprint – Related terms: non-peer-reviewed, early dissemination

A manuscript posted publicly before formal peer review, often to accelerate scientific communication.

Example: Reporting on a COVID-19 vaccine efficacy preprint while noting its non-reviewed status.

Practical application: Clearly label preprints, assess methodological rigor, and update stories once peer review completes.

Challenges: Rapid spread of unverified findings, media sensationalism, and retraction risk.

Privacy Law – Related terms: GDPR, HIPAA

Legal frameworks governing the protection of personal health information.

Example: Ensuring that a story about a hospital's infection rates does not reveal patient identities under GDPR.

Practical application: Conduct legal reviews, anonymize data, and obtain consent where required.

Challenges: Varying international regulations, cross-border data flows, and ambiguous interpretations.

Public Health Communication – Related terms: risk messaging, health promotion

The dissemination of information aimed at influencing population-level health behaviors.

Example: Explaining the importance of vaccination during an outbreak.

Practical application: Use clear messaging, incorporate behavior-change theories, and partner with health agencies.

Challenges: Misinformation, cultural resistance, and message fatigue.

Quarantine of Sources – Related terms: source verification, embargo enforcement

Temporarily restricting the use of a source's information until verification is complete or an embargo lifts.

Example: Holding a pharma-provided data set until independent analysis confirms its accuracy.

Practical application: Document the quarantine period, communicate expectations to sources, and lift restrictions only after validation.

Challenges: Time pressure, source impatience, and potential legal implications.

Reproducibility – Related terms: replication, methodological transparency

The ability of other researchers to repeat a study's procedures and obtain similar results.

Example: Highlighting that a landmark trial's methodology allows independent replication.

Practical application: Report on whether the original study provides enough detail for replication, and note any replication attempts.

Challenges: Limited data sharing, proprietary methods, and complex statistical models.

Risk Communication – Related terms: hazard perception, benefit-risk balance

Conveying the probability and severity of adverse outcomes associated with medical interventions.

Example: Explaining that a medication carries a 0.1% risk of severe liver injury.

Practical application: Use absolute numbers, visual aids, and contextual comparisons (e.g., "similar to the risk of driving").

Challenges: Numeracy gaps, emotional reactions, and sensationalist headlines.

Scientific Integrity – Related terms: research ethics, data honesty

Upholding standards of honesty, transparency, and accountability in the generation and reporting of scientific data.

Example: Reporting that a study was retracted due to fabricated data.

Practical application: Monitor Retraction Watch, flag questionable studies, and maintain a correction policy.

Challenges: Detecting subtle misconduct, pressure to publish, and reputational concerns.

Scientific Literacy – Related terms: critical appraisal, evidence interpretation

The ability of readers to understand basic scientific concepts, research design, and statistical inference.

Example: Helping readers differentiate between correlation and causation in a health story.

Practical application: Include sidebar explanations, define key terms, and provide links to educational resources.

Challenges: Varied educational backgrounds, misinformation, and limited attention spans.

Selective Reporting – Related terms: outcome reporting bias, cherry-picking

The practice of publishing only favorable results while omitting unfavorable or null findings.

Example: A press release that highlights a drug's positive primary endpoint but ignores negative secondary outcomes.

Practical application: Examine trial registries, compare published outcomes with pre-registered protocols, and disclose any discrepancies.

Challenges: Incomplete registries, limited access to raw data, and industry pressure.

Social Media Amplification – Related terms: viral spread, digital engagement

The rapid sharing of medical news across platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, often influencing public perception.

Example: A headline about a new therapy trending on Twitter, reaching millions within hours.

Practical application: Monitor social metrics, respond to misinformation promptly, and craft shareable yet accurate snippets.

Challenges: Speed versus verification, echo chambers, and algorithmic bias.

Source Credibility – Related terms: authority, trustworthiness

Assessment of a source's expertise, reputation, and impartiality.

Example: Preferring a peer-reviewed journal article over a corporate blog post for clinical data.

Practical application: Rate sources on a credibility scale, document rationale, and disclose any uncertainties.

Challenges: Hidden conflicts, overreliance on prestige, and emerging expert voices.

Stakeholder Engagement – Related terms: community involvement, collaborative reporting

Involving individuals or groups who have a vested interest in the health topic being covered.

Example: Consulting both clinicians and patient groups when reporting on a new guideline.

Practical application: Conduct focus groups, integrate feedback loops, and acknowledge contributions.

Challenges: Balancing divergent viewpoints, time constraints, and power dynamics.

Statistical Significance – Related terms: p-value, confidence interval

A measure indicating that an observed effect is unlikely to have occurred by chance alone, based on a predefined threshold (commonly p Study Design – Related terms: randomized controlled trial, cohort study

The methodological framework that determines how participants are selected, assigned, and followed.

Example: Describing a double-blind, placebo-controlled RCT evaluating a vaccine's efficacy.

Practical application: Identify the design early, explain its strengths and limitations, and relate it to the story's conclusions.

Challenges: Complex designs, jargon, and limited space for explanation.

Substantive Accuracy – Related terms: content fidelity, factual correctness

Ensuring that the core message of a story aligns with the original source's intent and data.

Example: Accurately conveying that a study found no statistically significant difference between two treatments.

Practical application: Summarize findings in a neutral tone, avoid adding interpretive commentary unless supported.

Challenges: Implicit bias, pressure to produce “impactful” narratives, and subtle misphrasing.

Summarization – Related terms: abstracting, condensation

Condensing complex research into a concise format while preserving essential information.

Example: Reducing a 30-page study into a 300-word news brief.

Practical application: Identify key objectives, methods, results, and implications; use bullet points for clarity.

Challenges: Omission of nuance, oversimplification, and loss of methodological detail.

Transparency – Related terms: openness, disclosure

Providing clear information about sources, methods, funding, and potential biases.

Example: Publishing a “methodology note” that outlines how data were obtained and verified.

Practical application: Adopt a transparency checklist for each article, include it in the online version.

Challenges: Balancing brevity with detail, managing proprietary information, and maintaining reader trust.

Undue Influence – Related terms: coercion, sponsor pressure

Any external force that compromises a journalist’s ability to report independently.

Example: A pharma representative threatening to withdraw access to future experts unless a favorable story is written.

Practical application: Document interactions, report to editorial leadership, and enforce safeguards.

Challenges: Subtle persuasion, financial dependencies, and fear of losing sources.

Unverified Claims – Related terms: rumor, speculation

Statements lacking supporting evidence from reputable sources.

Example: Reporting that a drug “will revolutionize treatment” without data.

Practical application: Flag such claims, seek corroboration, and either qualify or omit them.

Challenges: Speed of news cycles, source enthusiasm, and audience appetite for breakthroughs.

Value Judgment – Related terms: subjectivity, editorial opinion

An assessment based on personal or cultural standards rather than objective data.

Example: Declaring a particular therapy “the best” without comparative evidence.

Practical application: Separate factual reporting from opinion pieces, label editorial content clearly.

Challenges: Implicit bias, audience expectations for guidance, and blurring of fact/opinion lines.

Verification Protocol – Related terms: quality control, fact-check workflow

A systematic set of steps to confirm the accuracy of information before publishing.

Example: A three-step process: source confirmation, data cross-check, and senior editor sign-off.

Practical application: Document each step, assign responsibilities, and keep audit trails.

Challenges: Resource limitations, tight deadlines, and varying source accessibility.

Viral Misinformation – Related terms: fake news, health hoax

False or misleading health information that spreads rapidly across networks, often causing public harm.

Example: A claim that a common vaccine causes infertility that circulates on social media.

Practical application: Issue timely corrections, collaborate with platforms for removal, and educate readers on fact-checking.

Challenges: Confirmation bias, algorithmic amplification, and rapid re-emergence.

Whistleblower Protection – Related terms: source anonymity, legal safeguards

Legal and ethical measures to shield individuals who expose wrongdoing within medical institutions.

Example: Publishing a story based on a clinician's confidential report of data manipulation.

Practical application: Offer secure communication channels, keep source identities confidential, and consult legal counsel.

Challenges: Verifying authenticity, potential retaliation, and legal complexities.

Yield Reporting – Related terms: output metrics, impact assessment

Measuring the effectiveness of a medical news story in terms of reach, engagement, and influence on health behavior.

Example: Tracking clicks, shares, and subsequent changes in prescription rates after a drug safety article.

Practical application: Use analytics dashboards, conduct post-publication surveys, and adjust future reporting strategies.

Challenges: Attribution difficulties, privacy concerns, and interpreting correlation versus causation.