

Letters to the editor

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Role of media on the social perception of medical activity in Peru and Latin America

Authors: Isabel Silva-Ocas [1,2], Kevin Lemus-Arteaga [1,2,3], Jaime Gonzales-Saldaña [1,2.4], Jose Galvez-Olortegui [1,2], Tomas Galvez-Olortegui [1,5]

Affiliation:

[1] Scientia Clinical and Epidemiological Research Institute, Trujillo, Perú

[2] Facultad de Medicina, Universidad Nacional de Trujillo, Trujillo, Perú

[3] Círculo de Extensión Socio Cultural Daniel Alcides Carrión (CESCDAC), Trujillo, Perú

[4] Sociedad Científica de Estudiantes de Medicina de la Universidad Nacional de Trujillo (SOCEMUNT), Trujillo, Perú

[5] Escuela de Posgrado, Universidad Privada Antenor Orrego, Trujillo, Perú

E-mail: isilvao@scientiaceri.com

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Dear editor:

During last month, two controversial medical cases had extensive media exposure in Peru, presented under the headlines: "She went to the hospital due to kidney stones and got her arms and legs amputated" [1] and "Medical report concluded that she had 'mild' injuries" [2]. Both cases immediately generated public rejection, however there were facts not fully reported behind these headlines.

The first case is about a 25 year old woman who had undergone an operation because of staghorn renal calculi and subsequently presented a refractory septic shock which lead to acro-necrosis. Therefore, her limbs had to be amputated to save her life. In the second case, the term "mild" made reference to a "mild traumatic brain injury" in a woman victim of physical abuse. What do these two new stories have in common? A sensationalist sense, incomplete versions and lack of a medical expert assessment. A Brazilian model had a similar clinical history in 2009; unfortunately she died shortly after amputation [3]. In contrast to Peruvian journalism, the Brazilian media reported this case objectively, with medical expert advice after a complete report from the health department.

The media practices the right of citizens to freedom of information. Truthfulness and the way information is exposed, is the media's responsibility under any circumstances. Therefore, the following question arises: Which should be the media's role on the social perception of medical work? The media should expose information in a truthful, scientific and appropriate way to the public;

especially when complex cases are easily labeled as "negligence" like these two cases.

The social media campaign #SomosMédicosNoCriminales (#Wearedoctorsnotcriminals) exposed the medical workers' situation in Peru, and was supported by physicians from several Latin American countries. This situation brought out a discussion about the establishment of a law requiring professional indemnity insurance policy for physicians, as it is established in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay. The pertinence of this law raises questions related to its impact on the cost of care and the increase of defensive medicine. All this could lead to a change of medical paradigm, from a scientific and humanistic one to another focused on shielding doctors against any lawsuit attempt [4]. These aspects are relevant in Latin American countries where doctors deal with patient overload, low salaries and inadequate hospital infrastructures, unable to meet costs arising from lawsuits [4],[5].

In summary, doctors' reputations are seriously affected by media exposure of medical activity without scrutiny. Meanwhile, it is necessary to assess the impact of a law requiring professional indemnity insurance policies for physicians in Peru and other Latin American countries.

Notes

From the editor

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Author address:

[1] Manzana. G Lote. 22
Urbanización Vista Hermosa
Trujillo
Perú



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