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Suggested Reference

Menkes, D. B., & Lexchin, J. (2016). Skilled use of the media by vested interests to promote drugs and other health products. *BMJ*, 352: i1179.
doi: [10.1136/bmj.i1179](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.i1179)

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LETTERS



WHO GAINS FROM THE MEDIA'S MISREPRESENTATION OF SCIENCE?

Skilled use of the media by vested interests to promote drugs and other health products

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McCartney draws attention to the enduring problem of the media being all too ready to oversimplify, dramatise, and rehash medical science.¹ Such “churnalism” benefits the media, in revenue if not reputation, often at the expense of public understanding. It is sobering to consider that clinical trial authors themselves often initiate the “spin” cycle.²

Another concern, totally ignored by McCartney, is the skilled use of the media by vested interests to promote drugs and other health products. Evidence indicates how widespread, biased, and effective such promotions are, particularly when cloaked in respectable language and presented as scientific news rather than an advertisement.³ Cherry picked scientific “findings” are an analogous feature of direct to consumer advertising of prescription drugs,⁴ banned in most Western countries, with the notable exceptions of the US and New Zealand.⁵

Patients, doctors, and the public have a shared stake in the benefits of health literacy. Commercial distortion of medical science by the media, whether to sell copy or push product,

compromises patients’ ability to usefully participate in clinical decision making.⁶

Competing interests: None declared.

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