

Health Care in the Headlines

AHCJ Journalists Urged to Shape the National Conversation on Health

By Michele Cohen Marill

Some of the most riveting health stories of the year formed the backdrop for the annual gathering of health journalists, as panelists urged them to help shape the national dialogue, particularly on such issues as health disparities and access.

Major health stories have unfolded in the vicinity of the downtown Cleveland hotel that hosted the 17th annual Association of Health Care Journalists conference from April 7–10: lead poisoning in urban neighborhoods, concussions among the Cleveland Browns and other NFL players and Medicaid expansion by Ohio’s Republican governor (and presidential candidate), John Kasich.

“There’s a responsibility to tell the story for folks whose stories don’t often get told,” said Abdul El-Sayed, executive director and health officer of the Detroit Health Department, who was part of a keynote roundtable of four urban health commissioners.

The passion to tell those stories was on display at the conference, which attracted more than 600 journalists from 40 states and eight countries. Membership in AHCJ has grown by 50 percent in the past five years, and about 25 percent of members are now freelance writers.

The growth is fueled by a great demand for health information, from wonky pieces about policy to consumer-oriented advice. Health dominates news cycles, spilling into politics, sports, business and lifestyle.

“There’s a voracious need for health news,” says Karl Stark, president of AHCJ and assistant managing editor for business, health and science at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

AHCJ’s conference featured public health commissioners speaking about the consequences of urban poverty in their cities — Baltimore, St. Louis, Detroit and Cleveland. Health disparities are linked to social unrest, said Leana Wen, who became Baltimore city health commissioner about three months before the death of

Freddie Gray in police custody sparked violent protests.

“The neighborhood that Freddie Gray grew up in had a 20-year life-expectancy difference from a neighborhood just a few miles away,” she said. “At the end of the day, everything ties back to health. If you look, just underneath the violence is deep trauma and mental health issues that are under-recognized and under-treated.” Health journalists play a role in revealing those connections, said Wen, who also spoke in a session about the opioid epidemic.

Yet the journalists also were aware of the tense dynamic between reporters and their sources. The *Cleveland Plain-Dealer* wrote a series about lead poisoning, highlighting the city’s lack of lead inspections and mishandling of federal grant money designated for remediation of homes. The articles led to the resignation of several health officials. At AHCJ, Natoya Walker Minor, acting director of the Cleveland Department of Public Health, urged journalists to make sure their stories include “context.”

Brie Zeltner, a leading reporter of the series with colleague



ROUNDTABLE (L. TO R.): SUSAN HEAVEY, REPORTER, REUTERS; LEANA WEN, HEALTH COMMISSIONER, BALTIMORE; MELBA MOORE, ACTING DIRECTOR AND COMMISSIONER OF HEALTH, ST. LOUIS; ABDUL EL-SAYED, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND HEALTH OFFICER, DETROIT HEALTH DEPARTMENT; NATOYA WALKER MINOR, ACTING DIRECTOR, CLEVELAND DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

PHOTO BY MICHELE COHEN MATILL

Rachel Dissell, later noted that the newspaper is still having trouble getting access to public records related to the lead problems. While journalists need to build relationships with health officials to tell stories of underserved communities, they also remain adversaries, she said. “We have a role to hold them accountable,” Zeltner said.

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Results of a “right-to-know” survey of AHCJ members were released at the conference, revealing widespread concern about obstacles to reporting. About three-quarters of the 216 health journalists who responded to the survey said obtaining information from federal agencies is somewhat or very difficult.

“Getting information out of government sources is time-consuming and frustrating,” said Irene Wielawski, an independent journalist from New York who is a co-founder and board member of AHCJ and chair of the Right to Know Committee.

Access was not a problem at the AHCJ conference, which featured prime sources on leading stories. Josh Cribbs, an NFL

return specialist who is now a free agent, spoke frankly about how he “gamed” the concussion protocol so he could return to the field after being knocked unconscious. Pastor Jeffrey Hawkins talked about the frustration in his Flint, Michigan, neighborhood when public officials — and journalists — initially downplayed community concerns about the drinking water.

Those and other panels generated hundreds of tweets with the hashtag #AHCJ16. Among them:

@Lowell Dempsey: Watching ‘concussion’ was one thing, but watching NFL players talk about the topic completely changes the way I think abt football.

@Charles Ornstein: Really great advice by @BrieZeltner: “Data journalism doesn’t start with data. It starts with a question.”

@Yael L Maxwell: We have 3 obligations: legal (libel), ethical (truth over hype), storytelling (pt story has to illustrate story theme).

“I like to see what people
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POLITICO HEALTH REPORTER DAVID PITTMAN IN CLEVELAND.

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are saying,” said Nancy Lapid, editor-in-charge of Reuters Health, who recruits freelance writers at the AHCJ Pitchfest. “A lot of the panels are designed to help journalists cover these issues better.”

For the past 10 years, Gary Schwitzer, publisher of HealthNewsReview.org, and Ivan Oransky, vice president and global editorial director of MedPage Today and co-founder of Retraction Watch, have co-taught a session on reporting on medical studies. This year, they highlighted press releases that hype studies without revealing potential harm, cost of the intervention or limitations of the studies (see story, page 14).



PHOTO BY MICHELE COHEN MATILL

HEALTH JOURNALISM '16 ATTENDEES BARA VAIDA AND JILL PATTON AT CLEVELAND'S ROCK AND ROLL MUSEUM.

Tara Haelle, an independent journalist from Peoria, Illinois, explained the difference between absolute risk and relative risk. The effect of a drug may seem impressive if it reduces the risk of a disease by 33 percent — the relative difference between the control and intervention — but that is less noteworthy if the absolute change was from a risk of 3 percent to 2 percent.

Even longtime journalists can benefit from advice about looking carefully at medical studies, says Haelle, who attended the session for years before joining the panel. “It’s good to hear a reminder,” she said.

On the third day of the rock-and-roll-themed conference, journalists awoke to snow. They were rewarded for their fortitude with sessions that came straight from the headlines, including a status check on the Affordable Care Act and discussions of rising drug prices. In a luncheon address, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy spoke about why he decided to issue the first Surgeon General’s report on substance abuse, addiction and health, which is due out later this year.

David Shulkin, undersecretary of health at the Department of Veterans Affairs, came to a news briefing on the morning of April 8 — the day USA Today ran a Page 1 banner story that said: “VA bosses falsified veterans’ wait times.” Shulkin countered that with a talk about how the VA is improving.

Afterward, Shulkin stayed for some quick interviews. He remained upbeat as he took some tough questions from journalists.

“I’ve always appreciated the role of the press in being an external driver of change in health care,” he told NewsPro. ■

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the past eight months). Two so far have profiled outstanding efforts by health care journalists — AHCJ members Christie Aschwanden and John Fauber. Others will be profiled in the coming months. And health-care experts have been profiled, such as Drs. Otis Brawley, Laura Esserman, and John Ioannidis.

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Gary Schwitzer is the founder and publisher of HealthNewsReview. He is an adjunct associate professor in the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. He frequently leads workshops and seminars about health care journalism, including international presentations in Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, China, England, Finland, Germany, India, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico and Spain.



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