Why Write for the Public?

Doctors and journalists traditionally regard one another with mutual distrust. In my experience as a physician covering medicine for the Washington Post, and more recently as the author of a health column for Cosmopolitan Magazine, I have been amply exposed to the grudges and prejudices each profession holds toward the other. Physicians frequently get the chance to observe the spats and reconciliations in this rocky relationship, when members of one camp or the other hold forth on the editorial pages of medical journals.

The same themes tend to recur. Doctors invariably complain that medical articles appearing in the popular press are inaccurate, shallow, and sensational (Barclay, 1979; Soffer, 1978). They charge that reporters ignore the caveats appended to researchers’ findings, and encourage the public to expect magical cures and simple answers. They claim that the press’s portrayal of the health care system paints doctors as greedy and impersonal, eroding patients’ trust and converting the doctor-patient relationship into an adversarial one.

Journalists, for their part, complain that physicians are paranoid about media coverage (Grace, 1980). They often find researchers inaccessible—either unwilling to explain their findings, or worried that granting interviews may prevent their work from being published in medical journals (a consequence of the much-publicized “Ingelfinger-Relman
Rule” at the New England Journal of Medicine). They view doctors as patronizing in their attitude toward reporters, unwilling to believe in an interviewer’s intelligence or competence. And they consider doctors overly paternalistic toward patients, reluctant to relinquish any of their autonomy over decisions that affect patient care.

Enlightened observers on both sides have often pointed out that the dearth of cooperation between medicine and the press prevents the media from being used to fullest advantage as a force for health education (Bander, 1975; DeBakey, 1981; Houston, 1982). There is abundant evidence of the impact of media coverage on public awareness of health issues: Witness the surge of reported cases of toxic-shock syndrome that followed press reports of the new illness in 1980 (Davis, 1982), or the prompt drop in sales of Tylenol after an outbreak of deaths from product-tampering in 1982.

And the public’s appetite for health information and medical news is higher than ever. Reader surveys conducted by large newspapers and magazines consistently show that health is one of the areas of highest interest, and that medical columns are among the best-read features. By ignoring this hunger for information and by refusing to participate in the media’s attempts to satisfy it, responsible members of the medical profession all too often abandon the field to others who use medical publicity irresponsibly and selfishly (Rourk, 1981).

One partial remedy for this situation is to have more physicians become skilled in writing for the general public. Acquiring this skill offers benefits both for the individual doctor and for the profession as a whole. Learning to explain a medical problem in simple terms makes a physician more effective in communicating with his or her own patients, both orally and through brochures and information sheets prepared for distribution in the office or clinic (Anderson, 1980; Laher, 1981). It allows the physician to extend this power to communicate by writing articles for publication in newspapers or magazines, thereby reaching a much wider audience. It renders the physician more intelligible and, thus, more likely to be quoted fairly and accurately in interviews with reporters. Finally, it imparts to the physician a deeper understanding of the constraints hampering reporters, and of the skill required to write a balanced, accurate medical article for the lay reader. Such an understanding, in the long run, would make for friendlier relations between doctors and press.

First, Know Thy Audience

The three elements to be considered in planning and writing an article (on any topic) are content, structure, and style. The article’s content is the information it seeks to convey; its structure, the format chosen for presenting the information, including such considerations as total length,