

Physician-journalist guidelines proposed in wake of Haiti earthquake

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In the wake of extensive television news reporting in Haiti by physicians such as Dr. Sanjay Gupta on CNN, guidelines for physician-journalists in covering disasters are proposed in the current issue of *Electronic News*.

Within two days after the January 12 quake, CNN had sent Gupta, its chief medical correspondent, to the scene. Other network physician reporters, including Drs. Richard Besser (ABC News), Nancy Snyderman (NBC News), and Jennifer Ashton (CBS News), arrived in the week following the quake. The physician reporters faced an immediate question. Should they exclusively report? Or should they attend to the sick and injured? Or should they do both? And if so, how should they balance the duties and responsibilities of their two professions?

All four chose to spend some or most of their time attending to injured and dying Haitians. On returning, physician-journalists faced criticism that by reporting about their own medical efforts, they were exploiting their good deeds for crass ends.

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics offers no guidelines for physician reporters. In its "Statement of Principles," The Association of Health Care Journalists recognizes "that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort" and suggests "special sensitivity . . . when dealing with children, mentally handicapped people, and inexperienced sources or subjects."

The author of the article, Tom Linden, MD, is a professor of medical journalism in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and director of the medical and science journalism program. He proposes three rules for physician-journalists covering disasters.

- When physician journalists face medical emergencies, their duty to treat might take precedence over their responsibility to report.
- Standard practice should be to seek a parent's or guardian's approval before interviewing and featuring a child in a radio or television news report, whether they're in the United States or abroad.
- A physician reporter who treats a patient shouldn't feature that patient (or ask that patient for permission to be featured) on a radio or television report.

"[News](#) executives might well chafe at these restrictions, but physician journalists should stand their ground and not allow themselves or their patients to be used to boost ratings for commercial gain," writes Linden.

More information: The article "Reporting by TV Docs in Haiti Raises Ethical Issues" in the June issue of Electronic News is available free for a limited time at enx.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/4/2/60

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