

Safety first: Reporting food scares

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Journalists believe their primary role in food scares is to inform the public of potential health risks, according to Flinders research.

Public Health Research Fellow Dr Annabelle Wilson (pictured) interviewed 19 Australian journalists working in print, broadcasting and online [media outlets](#) about their response to [food scares](#) and their role in [food](#) trust.

The research questionnaire employed a hypothetical food scare in which [soy protein](#) isolate imported from Asia was shown to be contaminated and to have potential to cause life-threatening [liver damage](#).

"We asked them what they perceived their role in reporting information during a food scare to be; what they perceive their responsibility to be in reporting information to the public; and if they have a role in shaping whether the public trusts a particular food or food information," Dr Wilson said.

Responses from the participants were similar and consistent, Dr Wilson said, with the majority of [respondents](#) asserting that their main role in a food scare is to inform the public.

"Initially, the journalists' concern wasn't so much about laying blame, but more in playing a public service role; journalists also thought that it was their duty to be questioning and cynical on behalf of the public."

Journalists stated their intention would be to strive to be fair and

balanced, and accurate and honest in their reporting.

Dr Wilson said there was some acknowledgment that competition to break the story might mitigate against fair and balanced reporting and increase the chance of error, but that reporting the facts quickly would be the main priority because of the risks and "the need to let people know".

Dr Wilson said that secondary issues relating to the scare were identified as how and why the situation occurred, as well as issues around importation and the level of trust in Australia's [food supply](#) and its regulation.

"Most journalists felt that it wasn't the prime responsibility of the media to build trust in food," she said.

"They see the media's role as to report the facts – if in the process of the reporting, trust is destroyed, it's not the duty of the media to rebuild that trust."

Journalists did believe, however, that the media did play a role in restoring trust through positive stories subsequent to the event.

"Questioning by the media provides the information on which the public can base an informed decision about whether to place their trust or not."

Provided by Flinders University

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