

RESPONSIBLE & ETHICAL REPORTING ON TB

A resource for journalists

Responsible and ethical reporting on public health issues such as tuberculosis (TB) is essential to make sure that readers have access to accurate information. Reporting on TB responsibly can help break stereotypes, and communicate realistic and informed messages to the public. This document lists some important aspects to keep in mind when reporting on TB.

Give a balanced view. Try to cover all aspects, especially the human aspect.

TB is a complex disease. While covering aspects of the disease, try investigating its social, medical, personal, scientific, economic, educational, and political aspects, rather than just reporting, for instance, the number of positive cases/TB-related deaths. A story on TB need not always be gloomy either; including a few positive case studies or highlighting efforts by the government or NGOs also helps.

Use language that is appropriate and inclusive, not disparaging.

Use appropriate language, which is inclusive. For instance, no one “catches” TB, one is diagnosed with TB. Words such as “defaulter”, and “suspect” are frowned upon internationally. For instance, “defaulter” could be “person lost to follow-up”.

Respect privacy. Do not reveal the identity of a TB patient unless specifically permitted.

Unfortunately, TB is a highly stigmatised disease. Many people go undiagnosed because of the fear of stigma. When you quote someone, please be aware that people could lose their jobs or their homes. Journalists should not reveal the identity of a TB patient, unless s/he has given permission to do so. In their reports, journalists should strive to maintain the confidentiality of the TB patient who speaks to them. To contextualize the story, you could mention the age, broad area of residence, occupation without mentioning school, workplace etc.

Be careful while interpreting data. Speak to experts.

Do not assume that numbers always speak for themselves. Take into consideration any changes in the way the government records data. For instance, take into account any new laboratory and diagnostic tests that are being used, and any new notification requirements - for instance, if the government has made notification by the private sector compulsory. It also makes sense to take expert opinion seriously before choosing the appropriate angle for a story.

Debunk and dispel stereotypes. Do not propagate myths related to TB.

The stigma associated with TB is augmented by several misconceptions. Some of the common myths are that all forms of TB are communicable, or that TB only affects low-income groups. When reports describe TB patients in stereotypical circumstances, they contribute further to the misconceptions. Breaking stereotypes will positively contribute to breaking the stigma around TB. It is, therefore, important to communicate that TB can affect anyone and that it is completely curable, if diagnosed on time and treated appropriately, with no long-term consequences.

Independence: Maintain a healthy distance from the various stakeholders.

While reporting, it is important to keep a distance from various players, including the government, pharmaceutical industry, private practitioners and NGOs. While one can depend on these sources for information or data, always ensure that your story is free of bias and reflects multiple points-of-view. For instance, if government officials claim that a programme is working well, it may make sense to talk to patients and see if the key beneficiaries feel the same. In the event of a pandemic or epidemic, it is good to question government sources and data, and ask authorities to explain the manner in which the situation is handled.

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