

MELANOMA IN THE NEWS: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF ARTICLES IN THE AUSTRALIAN NEWSPAPER

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Introduction: Melanoma is a highly lethal, prevalent and much discussed disease in Australia. It is the 4th most commonly diagnosed cancer in Australia and it is currently projected that 11,057 Australians will develop melanoma on an annual basis.ⁱ It presents a major health issue in light of its great prevalence and preventability. We are aware of effective and inexpensive preventative measures and interventions, propagated by the Cancer Council such as the use of sun block, sunglasses, broad brimmed hats and shade seeking behaviours. The impact of such interventions however is largely dependent on public perceptions of melanoma; how common, lethal and preventable it is. Fundamental to the success of public health messages is the communication and transfer of information from doctors to patients, and in the event of insufficiency, people's perception may be influenced by other sources of information, such as newspapers. Newspaper articles may be driven by financial imperatives and be the product of cultural processes, however they are still considered as an informing source by their readership.

Objective: To analyse and synthesise articles discussing melanoma, and extract dominant ideologies and attitudes in order to ascertain a snap shot of discourses informing public perceptions of melanoma.

Design and Method: Thematic discourse analysisⁱⁱ was conducted on articles from *The Australian* published between 2000 and 2015, retrieved through a systematic database search. Dominant discourses were identified in the article collection and later discussed in terms of the degree to which ideas propagated in the press, concerning melanoma, mirror the reality of current public health and medical messages about skin cancer prevention and treatment.

Conclusions: This analysis revealed rather negative discourse in support of the notion that melanoma is largely determined by genetic factors beyond the individual's control, has a very poor prognosis, and is managed with experimental products from the pharmaceutical industry. There was a misleading emphasis on metastatic melanoma, with the potential to misinform what should be the readership's basic understanding of melanoma as a spectrum of disease, that is in the first instance largely preventable with sun safe practices and behavioural modification, and effectively treatable by early excision.ⁱⁱⁱ It is not reassuring that one could be lead to understand melanoma as a fatal genetic phenomenon. This is misleading discourse that is not in tandem, or tracking the developments in the dermatological or public health worlds. This calls into question the role of the media in accurately communicating public health messages. The implication then, is that efforts must be made to ensure that relevant and helpful information is disseminated amongst Australians, and that newspaper articles perhaps do not depict the status quo of understanding in a health field, but rather a snapshot of a novel idea, an idea however that could do a disservice to its readership.

ⁱ AIHW & Australasian Association of Cancer Registries (2012). Cancer in Australia: an overview 2012. Cancer series no. 74. Cat. no. CAN 70. Canberra: AIHW.

ⁱⁱ Hodges, B., Kuper, A., Reeves, S., (2008) Discourse Analysis. *BMJ*; 337;a879

ⁱⁱⁱ Rigel, D., Carucci, A., (2008) Malignant melanoma: prevention, early detection, and treatment in the 21st century. *CA Cancer J Clin.* 50(4):215-36.