

Media Discloses Mitt Romney's Health Info from Sources; Why is That Okay?



By Jamie Wells, M.D. — January 8, 2018



Credit: Wikimedia Commons [1]

CNN's Jake Tapper revealed the following about former Governor Mitt Romney:



Jake Tapper ✓
@jaketapper



Source close to [@MittRomney](#):

"Mitt Romney was treated over the summer for prostate cancer. He was treated surgically by Dr. Thomas Ahlering at UC Irvine Hospital in California. His prognosis is good; he was successfully treated."

1:55 PM · Jan 8, 2018

684 Retweets **1,937** Likes



Jamie Wells, MD, FAAP @jamiewellsmd · 49m



Replying to [@jaketapper](#) and [@MittRomney](#)

1) How are you disclosing private medical info? If it is without consent, then that is disturbing. Please clarify.

2) My article might be of interest- "President Trump To Have Customary Physical Exam In January. But, Does It Matter?" — read here acsh.org/news/2017/12/2...



Tapper reveals Romney received a prostate cancer diagnosis over the summer and was "successfully treated" with a "good" prognosis. Two issues came to mind upon observing this disclosure: 1) Why would the media release personal health information based on so-called *sources*? If without Mitt Romney's consent, then this is quite disturbing and unethical. 2) As I previously discussed in reference to President Trump's looming physical (see [here](#) [2]), is such a revelation even significant?

So, I went to review the litany of media pieces that followed CNN's. Many identified the origin of the news as coming from "sources." Steadily the slow reveal started to include the term "aides" to Mitt Romney and under conditions of "anonymity." For example, the [Salt Lake Tribune](#) [3] referenced the above CNN tweet and went on to say, "Mitt Romney, who is considering a Senate run from Utah, was treated for prostate cancer last year, an aide confirmed Monday. Romney, 70, was "successfully treated," according to a Romney aide who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss Romney's health."

Is nothing sacred in the media?

As someone who took an oath to do no harm and holds deeply to the basic tenets of decency and protecting patient privacy, I recognize that the media is not a medical professional bound to the same standards. So, if such a disclosure is deemed to be a violation of Romney's --- the actual patient's--- wishes, then it is a sad day for bioethics and all of us. Hopefully, the politician consented to this information being put into the public sphere making the issue less concerning. But it begs the question should this not be the case: Do we really want to foster an environment where the most sacred of personal information can so indiscriminately be shared?

To appreciate further the role of doctor-patient privilege and patient privacy, review [Did Sex Therapist Break Privilege Speaking About Matt Lauer?](#) [4]. To learn more about the erosion of such privacy, read [Big Brother's Latest Blow To Patient Privacy](#) [5].

Is such a disclosure particularly meaningful?

With President Trump's first White House physical evaluation imminent, I discussed [here](#) [2] whether the results actually matter. To summarize, there are innumerable medical conditions that can exist before a presidential run. Some will be of little to no consequence throughout the life of an administration, while new situations can present themselves. An individual's health status is fluid and dynamic, not static. Consider Sen. John McCain's recent brain cancer diagnosis or Rep. Steve Scalise's traumatic injuries from gunshot wounds. There are also incredible advancements and therapies being utilized and discovered that have turned many formerly fatal diseases into chronic illnesses.

Determining medical fitness for the task, involves a thorough understanding of the occupation along with the cognitive and physical health determinants of the specific person.

In [Who's NOT Medically Fit To Be President?](#) [6], I detail the thought process and obligations of a physician in discerning medical clearance for the job of President of the United States. These may be different than what the public would render of significance, hence, why based on the evaluating physician's determination it is the public that casts the final vote. Before modern media, many were

elected who would stand no chance today. Not because doctors would disqualify them, but because the public might not elect them.

COPYRIGHT © 1978-2016 BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH

Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/01/08/media-discloses-mitt-romneys-health-info-sources-why-okay-12379>

Links

[1] [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mitt_Romney_by_Gage_Skidmore_4_\(x\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mitt_Romney_by_Gage_Skidmore_4_(x).jpg)

[2] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/12/29/president-trump-have-customary-physical-exam-january-does-it-matter-12344>

[3] <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2018/01/08/reports-mitt-romney-was-successfully-treated-for-prostate-cancer-last-year/>

[4] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/12/05/did-sex-therapist-break-privilege-speaking-about-matt-lauer-12235>

[5] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/08/23/big-brothers-latest-blow-patient-privacy-11724>

[6] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2016/09/21/whos-not-medically-fit-be-president-10196>