Correlation versus causation: The media typically gets it wrong

By ACSH Staff — January 22, 2014

How many times in the last week have you seen headlines such as Coffee as a memory booster [1], or How Diet Soda Makes You Fat [2]? Well, according to [3] a study conducted by researchers in training at Harvard and the NIH, these observational studies (assessing correlation) are covered more often in the media than randomized controlled trials (RCTs) which are usually far more reliable.


What they found was [n]ewspapers were more likely to cover observational studies and less likely to cover RCTs than high impact journals. Additionally, when the media does cover observational studies, they select articles of inferior quality. Newspapers preferentially cover medical research with weaker methodology."

The authors point out that this was just one study and did not take into account any press releases put out by the newspapers. They also acknowledge that a large part of what newspapers and other media sources decide to cover is based on appeal to readers.

ACSH s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan acknowledges that point. However, she adds, this desire to appeal to readers does not excuse the media from getting it right when it comes to the difference between observational and randomized controlled trials. No matter the subjects covered by the media, it is imperative that they are able to grasp the difference between these two. Correlation and causation are two very different things.
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