

PRESS & MEDIA

## Reporter, Heal Thyself

“Coverage by the News Media of the Benefits and Risks of Medications” by Ray Moynihan, Lisa Bero, Dennis Ross-Degnan, David Henry, Kirby Lee, Judy Watkins, Connie Mah, and Stephen B. Soumerai, in *The New England Journal of Medicine* (June 1, 2000), 10 Shattuck St., Boston, Mass. 02115-6094.

Medical breakthroughs and promising new treatments are a staple of health and science news coverage. But after studying a sample of 180 newspaper stories and 27 TV reports that appeared between 1994 and 1998, Moynihan, an Australian journalist, and his co-authors from Harvard Medical School and other institutions, conclude that reporters need to be more skeptical.

The researchers studied news coverage of the benefits and risks of three drugs: alendronate, used for the treatment and prevention of osteoporosis; pravastatin, a cholesterol-lowering drug used to prevent cardiovascular disease; and aspirin, also used to prevent cardiovascular disease. They found that only 124 of the news reports gave any quantitative assessments of the benefits of the drug, and 83 percent of those offered only the relative benefits, not the absolute figures (which might provide less reason to cheer). For example, in reporting the results of a study on osteoporosis treatment in 1996, three

major TV networks all said that the new drug could cut the incidence of hip fracture in half, a benefit that one reporter declared “absolutely miraculous.” Unreported was the fact that the incidence of hip fracture was very low in the first place—only two percent among patients who did not receive the drug.

Also left out of many news stories were the potential downsides of new treatments. More than half the reports failed to mention possible adverse side effects of the drugs, and 70 percent ignored the matter of cost.

Moynihan and his colleagues also implicitly suggest that reporters should be more skeptical of the motives of the scientists and other experts who wax enthusiastic about the latest treatments or supposed breakthroughs. Half the news reports cited experts or studies with known financial ties to manufacturers of the drug, yet 39 percent of those stories failed to mention the connection.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

## The Mystery of Aztec Sacrifice

“Aztec Human Sacrifice as Expiation” by Michel Graulich, in *History of Religions* (May 2000), Univ. of Chicago Press, 5720 S. Woodlawn, Chicago, Ill. 60637.

In the centuries before the Spanish conquest in the early 1500s, the Aztecs of Mexico ritually sacrificed at least 20,000 people a year. What was their intent? The usual explanations given by scholars are that the Aztecs wanted to propitiate their gods, to nourish them with the victims’ hearts, or to revitalize these deities by symbolically killing them. Graulich, director of religious studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, in Paris, suggests that the Aztecs had a complex theology in which sacrifice had one basic—and what some might deem more exalted—purpose: atonement.

The primary purpose of sacrifice, Graulich maintains, was “expiation of sins or transgressions in order to deserve a worthy afterlife.” Whose sins were erased? First, those of the victims, nearly all of whom came from “guilty” classes: prisoners of war, slaves, and, in a more limited way, criminals. The author notes that Aztec texts such as the myth of Quetzalcoatl’s victory at Mixcoatepec “present prototypical victims of human sacrifice as transgressors.”

The Aztecs killed their victims in various ways: excising their hearts, cutting their throats, beheading them, drowning them, burning