

How to tell your story

for researchers at the QEII Health Sciences Centre

Why should you tell your research story?

There are many reasons to tell your research story.



To be accountable:

There's a good chance that at least some aspect of your research is supported by public funds, through such means as government agencies, academic institutions, and hospitals. You are therefore accountable to the public, to let them know you're making good use of public money, for the public good.



To share your expertise:

As a clinician or health researcher, you are an expert in a topic (or topics) that matters to people. People will respect and appreciate what you have to say.



To help our community build support for research:

Our current fiscal climate means competition for research funds is becoming increasingly stiff. As a group, we need to raise awareness of the scope and quality of research that's taking place at the QEII and the positive impact it's having on patient care. This will help us build public and political support for our research programs, so we can preserve existing sources of funds and create new funding opportunities. Fund-raising from private citizens and corporations is a big part of this. By working together to share our research stories, we will help the QEII Foundation, and other foundations that support our researchers, in their efforts to raise money for research.

How can we help you?

Research Services can help you tell your research story.

We've launched a research communications strategy and work closely with our communications and Foundation staff to tell our research stories through a variety of means. These include:

- social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)
- website
- newsletters and magazines
- "research focus" bulletins (covering a specific department or research area)
- research annual report
- news releases and story pitches to local, regional and national media

To do this, **WE NEED YOUR NEWSWORTHY STORIES!**

Please send a brief summary of your research story to:
Emily Walker, Communications Coordinator, Research Services,
emily.walker@cdha.nshealth.ca

If you have questions about how to submit your research, contact Emily at 902-473-5156.

Audience matters...

Remember, there are degrees of newsworthiness, based on the audience for a particular media vehicle. For example, a story that is newsworthy for an in-house newsletter or social media page may not be newsworthy for the local newspaper or supertime television news. In other words, a story could be of great interest to QEII staff members or even the entire local health research community, but of little interest to the broader community.

Please bring your story to us—we can determine what audience will be most interested in your story and choose an appropriate media vehicle.

How do I know my story is newsworthy?

Before you send us your story, run it through the “newsworthy test.”

First of all, ask yourself “Why does this research matter?”

If you have a compelling answer, you most likely have a newsworthy story. When assessing your story for newsworthiness, consider the following:

Will the results of my research make a difference for a lot of people?

Has my research led to a significant breakthrough in understanding?

Is my research story timely? Does it relate to an upcoming season (e.g., tick season, heart month) or a topic that’s currently making news?

Is there anything unusual or extremely interesting about my study or findings?

To make your story more media-friendly, think about how you would answer these questions:

Is there a compelling human-interest angle to this story?

Can we put a human face on the story, perhaps by involving a patient?

Can the average person relate to the subject matter of my research?

Can I explain my research in a way that will make sense to the average person?

Can I show a tangible benefit of my research to individuals or society?

Does my story lend itself to interesting visuals?

How do I tell my story?

How you tell your story depends on the audience and medium.

Adapting to your audience:

Obviously, if you're communicating to an audience of your colleagues—speaking at a conference or writing a journal article, for example—you can use the technical and scientific terms this audience understands. When you're communicating to anyone else—even experts in other fields—you have to translate your research story into common terms. Be patient with others' lack of knowledge in your particular field. When you must use complex terms, explain the meaning, so your audience can stay engaged. Otherwise, you will lose their interest.

Give us the “Famous Five”—Ws, that is!

Remember W5? Think of the “five W's” that reporters are tasked to answer. Why is the most important!

Who?

What?

When?

Where?

Why?

“**How?**” A cousin of the five W's, “how?” is of lesser importance—but include this if your methods are unusual or interesting.

Rules for telling your story: Whether you're speaking or writing, following

Keep it simple.

Start with the main point then back it up with details.

Focus on results and impacts rather than process and methods.

Use short words, short sentences and short paragraphs.

Avoid acronyms and jargon.

Explain technical and scientific terms immediately and clearly.

4 **Use examples** and analogies to explain complex ideas.

How do I tell my story?

Adapting to the medium:

How you tell your story also depends on the medium (text, video, audio, in person). In most cases, you will be telling your story verbally:

- to an interviewer who will then write your story for a news release or an article to be published in print or online
- to an interviewer who is recording the interview for radio, television or Internet at a later time
- to an interviewer who is broadcasting the interview live via radio or television as you speak
- to an in-person audience (as small as a single person in the proverbial elevator, or as large as a roomful of conference delegates)

In some cases, you will be writing your research story—for example, when you prepare a lay summary for a grant application, an abstract for a conference presentation, or a manuscript for a scientific journal. These are all very specialized vehicles directed to audiences who are used to reading complex materials. Even so, it is important to remember that members of these audiences are not necessarily subject-matter experts in your particular field and will understand and appreciate your message more if you take care to write in a clear, simple, direct and engaging manner. Many of the same “rules for telling your story” still apply!

these rules will help your audience understand.

Use colourful expressions, or “quotable quotes,” to make an impression.

Be honest—don’t exaggerate OR downplay the importance.

Use the active voice; i.e., “Dr. Alex Jones conducted the study at the QEII,” instead of “The study was conducted at the QEII.”

Acknowledge partners and funders.

Identify affiliations—clinical and academic titles or roles.

What are your key messages?

Before you tell your story, think about what you want the audience to take away. What are your key messages? It is essential to identify and clarify your key messages. These are the fundamental points that express what matters most about your research.

Think about your research. Is it a new project, a new finding, or a result that will change practice or policy? Is there something from your findings that people can apply in their own lives? Will the research lead to better patient outcomes, economic spinoffs or cost savings to the system? Think through the benefits of your research in terms that the broader community will understand.

Key points about key messages:

- Limit the number of key messages to three or four “take-home” points. That is all a reader, viewer or listener will remember.
- Think about what matters to your audience when defining your key messages.
- Before an interview, write your key messages down in short, succinct sentences, free from jargon or technical terms.

Start with the punchline

Telling your research story is not like writing a mystery, where you drop hints while gradually building to the conclusion. Don't keep your audience guessing. State your main point right away to grab their interest, and then back it up with details.

This style of storytelling is called the “reverse pyramid” style and it comes from the newspaper business. When putting together a newspaper, copy editors traditionally make space by cutting stories from the bottom. So, reporters open their stories with a “lead” (opening sentence) that succinctly says “this is the point.”

Pitfalls to avoid

Topics to avoid

Please remember, there are certain topics that you should not discuss with media. There is no such thing as “off the record.” Media can use anything you say in an interview. Here are topics you should avoid:

- Drug information is proprietary and a sponsor has reasons for not sharing certain information. You may need to contact your sponsor regarding what information you release to the media and when you can release it, so that you are not in breach of contract.
- Don't share specific details about intellectual property that has not yet been protected.
- Don't provide contact information in an interview—this is viewed as advertising by Health Canada and in breach of Health Canada clinical research regulations. Don't “recruit” in an interview. You must follow the recruiting process outlined in your study protocol.
- Avoid comparing different trial drugs and their outcomes. It is better to speak in generalities.

There are no “do overs” in media

You will not have an opportunity to review the reporter's story before it goes to press or air. Be as clear and direct as possible to help the reporter prepare an accurate story. Once it's published, posted or aired, it's out there and can't be changed. If there is a serious error, you can contact the media outlet to print or broadcast a correction.

The first few paragraphs convey the essential information. Details, background and supporting data follow from there in reverse order of importance, in case those paragraphs get snipped.

The same principle applies in radio and television. If you beat around the bush or get caught up in sideline details, the interviewer may run out of time before you have a chance to make your point.

Taking your story to the media

If Research Services determines that your story is newsworthy enough that it could get picked up by the local, regional or national media, we will let you know.

Our consultant will then be in touch to:

interview you to learn more about the study or findings
help you identify and articulate your key messages
identify any controversial angles and plan how to deal with them in an interview
discuss the possibility of involving a patient
prepare a draft media release for your review and approval
discuss your needs for media training, if any
work with you to determine optimal timing for sending the release
send the release and follow up with media to pitch the story
book interviews in consultation with you

If the media pick up on your story, you may be required to:

go to a local television studio for a live interview—often, this is early in the morning, although it could also be late afternoon or early evening
go to a local radio station for a live or pre-taped interview, anytime from early morning to late afternoon
host a print reporter and photographer for an interview and photo session in your lab, clinic or office
host a television or radio reporter and technician in your lab, clinic, office or other appropriate venue
do a phone interview with a print or online reporter

So you think you want to be on TV?

A television interview can be the most terrifying prospect for a researcher. If you prepare for the interview and approach it with confidence, however, it can be a positive and enjoyable experience that makes a powerful impact on the audience.

Here are some simple rules to help you shine on TV:

Breathe and relax! Most media are very supportive—they want to share your research with their viewers and will do their best to help you feel at ease.

Write down your key messages and “quotable quotes” beforehand—you will only have a few minutes to get your messages across so you want them on the tip of your tongue.

Keep your answers short so the interviewer can move on to the next question.

Don't rush your answers, even though you're keeping them short—speak slowly and succinctly, in everyday terms.

Pay attention to your grooming and wear neat clothing in solid colours (no stripes or checks and avoid white and black, unless you're in your lab and you need to wear a lab coat).

Ensure the media will be able to interview you in a quiet spot without interruptions, if they are coming to your location.

Giving your research a human face

Media often want to involve patients in their coverage of research, to give their story a human-interest angle that engages the audience and adds emotional impact. It's helpful to already have a patient lined up who has agreed to be interviewed and signed a Capital Health media release consent form. It's critically important that patients' participation is entirely voluntary; there can't be any pressure on them to take part.

If the researcher/hospital cannot provide a patient, media will often find a patient themselves. This may or may not reflect well on your story.

Ensuring good visuals

What is B-roll?

Television producers know that viewers get bored if all they see on the screen is “talking heads.” So, if a TV station is doing a “story” (as opposed to an in-studio interview), they will send their cameras to your location not only to record the interview but also to gather “B-roll” footage. This could be a nurse talking to a patient, a student performing a task in a lab, you talking to a colleague...anything that tells a visual story about the research and its context. These will air throughout the piece, interspersed with the clips of you talking. It takes some of the pressure off you, knowing you will not be the visual focus the whole time!

What if I use animals in my research? If animals are used in your research, move them out of the location. If the animals are to be featured, you must get clearance from Dalhousie University’s veterinarian.

Timing is everything:

You could have the biggest research story of the year, but the release will fall flat if it goes out at a time when you cannot make yourself available for interviews. It’s very important, therefore, to send a media release at a time when you will be in town, and reasonably available and flexible, the day of the release and for several days following.

Media tend to work to very tight deadlines, with many competing priorities and restrictions on their time (camera and studio availabilities, for example). They may have space or time to fill one day, and a reporter they can assign, but if we can’t provide them with the source when they have the opportunity to do a story, the opportunity could vanish the following day. That said, they do understand how tight your time is too, and will do their best to accommodate your busy schedule. Flexibility and accommodation work both ways!

Sometimes it takes a week or two after the release for all the interviews to be completed, so keep this in mind.

What about social media?

Many researchers and clinicians have embraced social media as a way to share their stories more directly with their communities and the broader public. Twitter is an especially effective way to share bite-sized pieces of information—as long as you realize that you have to keep up with your Twitter feed, tweet regularly, and respond to people. As a researcher, you can take advantage of the fact that Capital Health has a Twitter account—get them to follow you, and they will re-tweet your tweets!

Capital Health also has a Facebook page, as does Dalhousie Medical School. Both are happy to share research stories involving their members—particularly links to stories that have appeared in the mainstream media.

There are many options in the social media universe, and you have a limited amount of time, so choose your social media vehicles carefully.

To see what the American Association for the Advancement of Science has to say about the importance of using social media to share research findings, visit the following link:
<http://membercentral.aaas.org/announcements/2014-annual-meeting-how-start-sharing-your-science-social-media>



Now you can tell your story

Should you get media training?

Almost any researcher will benefit from media training. Unless you have a lot of experience translating your research for a general audience, you will be able to tell your story more confidently and effectively if you complete some media training.

If you already have a lot of experience talking to the media, have given many interviews, have a “way with words,” and feel confident and in control during interviews, you probably don’t need media training. If, however, you are likely to be called upon to comment on a controversial issue that could put you in an awkward or damaging situation, you should definitely pursue media training.

What are the options for media training?

Capital Health’s communications and marketing team offers media training for researchers, in scheduled group sessions or one-on-one by request. Stay tuned for information about upcoming sessions, or contact Everton McLean, 902-473-8681, to put your name down for a group or one-on-one session.

Still want more information about telling your research story?

Contact: Emily Walker, 902-473-5156
emily.walker@cdha.nshealth.ca

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