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## News Coverage of the American Cancer Society's Update to Colorectal Cancer Screening Guidelines



**To the Editor:** On May 30, 2018, the American Cancer Society (ACS) released a guideline update on colorectal cancer (CRC) screening for average-risk adults that proposed a qualified recommendation that screening begin at age 45 years.<sup>1</sup> This recommendation differs from the US Multi-Society Task Force on Colorectal Cancer<sup>2</sup> and the US Preventive Services Task Force.<sup>3</sup> The ACS recommendation to begin screening before age 50 was based on increasing disease burden in the

younger population<sup>4</sup> and microsimulation modeling. The ACS recommended that screening begin at age 45 years as a qualified recommendation, rather than a strong recommendation, as no randomized trials provide direct evidence of the effect of CRC screening for people between the ages of 45 and 49 years.<sup>1</sup>

Given the substantial increase in individuals who would be indicated for screening, the ACS announcement was widely covered in the news media and has provoked an ongoing debate. We aimed to determine how news outlets disseminated and interpreted this recommendation by searching the terms “American Cancer Society” and “colorectal cancer,” “colon cancer,” or “bowel cancer” in both the Factiva database and Google’s news search (<http://news.google.com>), and additionally used the Altmetric bookmarklet linked to the published guideline, to identify all news articles and press releases that covered the announcement from May 30, 2018, to June 30, 2018.

All articles were read in full, and we extracted the following: country

and type of publication; whether the article mentioned that the recommendation is “qualified” as opposed to “strong,” other societies’ discordant recommendations, or that microsimulation modeling was used; if a physician outside of the ACS committee was quoted and if that physician expressed reservations about the guideline update; and, if the article included a patient anecdote.

Of 45 unique articles and press releases from 190 news outlets in the month following the publication of the ACS guideline update (Table), only 15 (33.3%) mentioned the “qualified” nature of the recommendation and 17 (37.8%) mentioned that microsimulation modeling was used. Twenty-seven articles (60.0%) mentioned that other societies still recommended starting CRC screening at the age of 50 years. Among 31 (68.9%) publications that quoted at least one physician who was not part of the ACS committee, 11 (35.5%) quoted physicians who expressed reservations about the guideline update. A patient anecdote was included in 8 (17.8%) articles, and half of those

**TABLE. Unique Articles/Press Releases (n=45)**

	Number (%) mentioned
Country of publication	
United States	42 (93.3)
Canada	1 (2.2)
France	1 (2.2)
Australia	1 (2.2)
Type of publication	
News	32 (71.1)
Health	10 (22.2)
Society	2 (4.4)
Foundation	1 (2.2)
Mentions recommendation was “qualified” as opposed to “strong”	15 (33.3)
Mentions that other societies have discordant recommendations	27 (60.0)
Mentions that modeling was used (not controlled trials)	17 (37.8)
Outside physician quoted	31 (68.9)
Expressed reservations	11 (35.5)
Patient anecdote	8 (17.8)
Under age 45 years	4 (50.0)
Over age 45 years	4 (50.0)

patients were diagnosed before the age of 45 years (ie, would not have benefitted from the revised recommendation).

This analysis of media coverage of the ACS's CRC screening guideline update found that while the publication was extensively covered by almost 200 news outlets, two-thirds of the articles did not mention that the earlier screening age recommendation was "qualified" as opposed to "strong" due to the nature of the evidence on which the recommendation is based. As mass media coverage of health issues has been shown to influence public behavior,<sup>5</sup> this study suggests that it is important for those formulating influential health screening

guidelines to consider that the lay media's reporting may not accurately convey the nuances of the decisions or the evidence upon which decisions are based.

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