
Cancer Tops Heart Disease: Only Half A Story

The media sensationalises. Of course, this statement surprises nobody. But the frequency and magnitude of the hype (deceit?) is so great that some misinformation slips through even the most circumspect reader's filters from time to time.

I'm sure you see it in the financial section daily. The example that got my goat this morning, however, is from the health section rather than finance. But it's typical and worth studying. The headline in *The Age* hollered 'Cancer pips heart disease as top killer'. *The Sydney Morning Herald* wailed 'Australia's new number 1 killer'. Both linked to story by Amy Corderoy titled '[Cancer overtakes heart disease as biggest killer in Australia: World Health Organisation](#)'.

None of the facts presented are in question. And the broad advice offered—don't smoke, don't drink to excess, eat less processed food—certainly won't hurt anyone. The wording in the article is carefully constructed and not wrong, but it is misleading. If you took the message that dying from cancer was on the rise, then I suspect the author feels they've done their job well.

To quote [Aaron Levenstein](#), 'statistics are like a bikini. What they reveal is suggestive, but what they conceal is vital'. Corderoy used plenty of Photoshop in this article.

Here's the reality. Cancer deaths have overtaken heart attack deaths because heart attack deaths have been falling magnificently. According to Fairfax's own archives, [heart attack deaths in Australia fell 17% from 2001 to 2010](#)—what wonderful news to celebrate. Per capita deaths would be down even more.

Cancer deaths, on the other hand, are on the up, but at less than the growth in population. [Per capita deaths from cancer have thus been falling](#). It's good news, but not as great as the news on heart disease.

If newspapers were actually about delivering the news, here are a few more appropriate titles for that article:

'Winning the battle against heart disease'

'Good news on cancer, great news on heart disease', or even

'Cancer more resistant to medical and lifestyle intervention than heart disease'

Instead, we get obfuscation because fear apparently sells better than good or accurate news, at least in the short run. In the long run, however, Fairfax and other media players risk becoming as irrelevant as, say, [Today Tonight](#). In the meantime, be on guard to their deliberate misinformation.