

Impact of emergency departments in the mass media

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Aims: To assess the views of physicians who work in emergency departments (EDs) on the image projected by the EDs in the mass media as well as the mediatic possibilities of these EDs.

Methods: Questionnaire given to 140 physicians in charge of Spanish EDs with different levels of complexity.

Results: Fifty nine ED physicians responded 88% of whom had appeared in some type 8 mass media. The news was positive in 52% of cases, negative in 25% and neutral in 23%. 87% of the news appeared in local; 63% in regional and 13% in national. As compared to positive news that of negative connotation had the highest probability of appearing in national mass media ($p < 0.001$). Forty-me percent of the responders reported that positive news should appear in the mass media while 27% considered that news should appear independently of the connotation and 32% stated that ED should never appear in the news. Seventy-three percent of ED take part in activities of social projection and this attitude reduced the possibility of being a source of negative news ($p < 0.05$). Most of the ED physicians who responded to the survey were trained in communication skills or recognised their importance. They believed that the ED was or could be a potential source of positive news and also that their hospital had adequate structures to establish a good dialogue with the mass media.

Conclusions: EDs are often a source of positive news; this good image may be increased using strategies to this end. Most of the physicians surveyed thought that the good image of the EDs could be further improved. [Emergencias 2008;20:187-190]

Key words: Emergency Service, hospital. News. Mass media.

Introduction

Many of the professionals working in the emergency department (ED) can cite some occasion on which some ED, and even the one in which they work, has been the objective of news in the mass media. The good image (of resolution, accessibility, dedication and many other qualities of which we may be described) achieved at the expense of daily work in "on the edge" conditions most of the days of the week, is largely forgotten when, some medium of communication, written press, television or radio, reports a negative aspect of our department or departments. "Lengthy waiting times for assistance", "strikes by ED professionals", "overcrowding of patients due to the lack of beds" or "aggressions" are some of the subjects which may be encountered in the headlines of audiovisual media^{1,2} and which, regardless of whether the responsibility of the events lies or not in the ED, the main repercussion is in these images. We may or may not be

aware of this. We may be satisfied thinking that it is inevitable. The different opinions on the subject are probably largely due to experience more than to other criteria of greater objectivity. Even considering the question of image as a frivolity more appropriate to a setting other than that of medicine³, may have impeded the joining of forces to strengthen it to "seeming" in addition to "being".

The aim of the present study was to know the internal opinion of emergency medicine physicians with respect to the mass media possibilities of our ED to ultimately improve the quality perceived of our professional work. We also investigated the presence of possible differences based on whether the EDs were the source of positive or negative news.

Methods

The tool used to carry out this study was a questionnaire aimed at the heads of the EDs of

hospitals in all the autonomic communities of Spain. The hospitals were chosen to allow representation of all the levels of medical complexity. The questionnaire contained 10 questions and was sent by post and email from April 24 to 28, 2007. Of a total of 140 questionnaires sent, 59 were duly completed and returned.

The data were managed as a calculation sheet. Descriptive results are presented and the Chi-square or the Fisher exact tests were used accordingly for comparison of the variables.

Results

The descriptive results are shown in Table 1. It is of note that 88% of the ED reported having been the objective of some communication media within the last year, although this was mainly in the local media (87%). In 27 ED (52%) the news had been favourable and in 13 (25%) unfavourable. It is interesting that although the local and regional media reported the news regardless of its connotation, the diffusion of negative news by the national media was statistically significantly more frequent ($p < 0.001$; Figure 1). The heads of the ED preferred to be present in the mass media only if the news was favourable in 24 cases, never in 19 and always (independently of the connotation of the news) in 16. It should be underlined that among the latter, 8 ED had been on the news for a negative event since it was considered better to appear in the mass media.

Seventy-three percent ($n = 43$) of the departments organised or participated in activities not strictly related to healthcare but carrying a variable degree of social projection and repercussion. Despite this, 6 (14%) departments appeared in the press for negative aspects. In 4 of these 6 cases the heads of the department had received training in communication skills and all these centres had a specific department to manage external communication. However, the probability of appearing in the media for negative news was significantly lower in the departments which promoted their external image with participation in acts of social projection ($p < 0.05$; Figure 2).

Despite more than half of the heads of the ED not having training in communication skills, 94% believed that this type of knowledge was fundamental for better performance of their work. In all the centres except one, an institutional service centralised external communication. In no case did this function belong to the head of the ED.

Opinions on whether the ED was a potential source of positive news were equally divided be-

Table 1. Results of the survey

Has your ED been on the news? (n = 59)	
- Yes	52 (88%)
- No	6 (10%)
- No comment	1 (2%)
What connotation did the news have? (n=52)	
- Positive	27 (52%)
- Negative	13 (25%)
- Neutral	12 (23%)
- No comment	0
In what media did it appear? (n=52)	
- Local media	45 (87%)
- Regional media	33 (63%)
- National media	13 (25%)
- No comment	1 (2%)
Do you think ED should appear on the news? (n=59)	
- Always	16 (27%)
- Only if the news is positive	24 (41%)
- Never	19 (32%)
- No comment	0
Does your ED organise or assist in acts of social promotion outside the purely medical setting? (n=59)	
- Yes	43 (73%)
- No	15 (25%)
- No comment	1 (2%)
Have you received training in communication skills? (n = 59)	
- Yes	24 (41%)
- No	35 (59%)
- No comment	0
If not, do you think this training is necessary for you to carry out your work? (n=35)	
- Yes	33 (94%)
- No	2 (6%)
- No comment	0
Who is in charge of contact with the press in your hospital? (n=59)	
- Press department	37 (63%)
- User information department	11 (19%)
- Medical Executive Committee	5 (8%)
- Others	2 (3%)
- Nobody	1 (2%)
- No comment	2 (3%)
Do you think the EDs are sources of positive news? (n=59)	
- Yes	29 (49%)
- No	30 (51%)
- No comment	0
If not, do you think they could be? (n = 30)	
- Yes	24 (80%)
- No	5 (17%)
- No comment	1 (3%)

ED: Emergency department.

tween yes and no. Nonetheless, those who believed the answer to be no were optimistic with respect to the future, with 80% stating that this could be achieved.

Discussion

The present study demonstrates that the mass media does, with a certain frequency, report positive news related to the EDs. Specifically, two thirds of the new reports were positive while only one third were negative⁴. However, the reach or diffu-

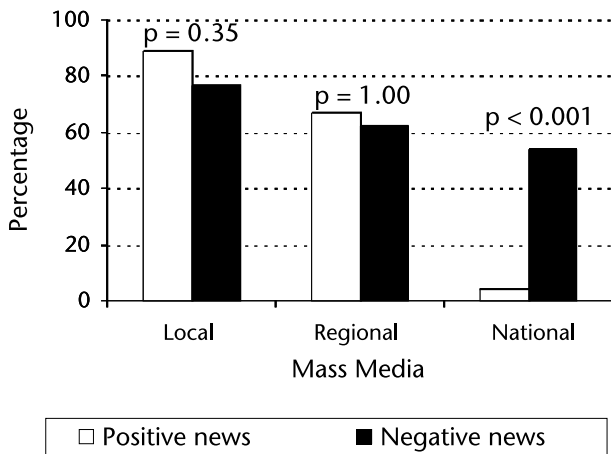


Figure 1. Relationship between the type of news and the media of diffusion.

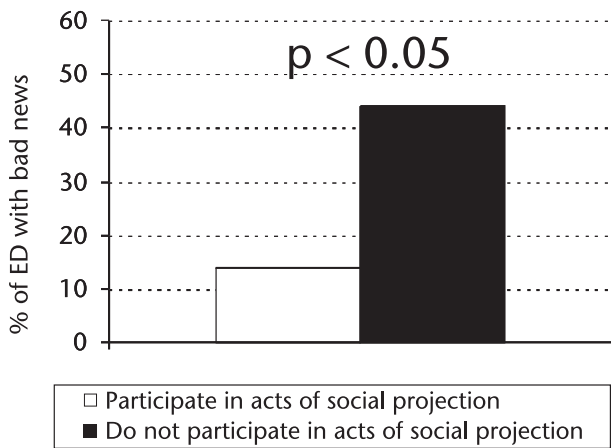


Figure 2. Relationship between participation in acts of social projection and the frequency with which the ED was the source of negative news.

sion of negative news was found to be greater than positive reports which were significantly more frequent within the local or regional setting⁵. Interestingly, there also seemed to be a relationship between the lack of strategies of social projection and the possibility of being a source of negative news⁶, since the departments which were careful of their image and were involved in acts not strictly medical were the focus of a lower percentage of negative news.

One conclusion which may be derived from the

present data is that the large hospitals do not have exclusivity with respect to news reports since 88% of the EDs were the source of news independently of their size or location. Thus, the image of the ED should be considered as a question which affects all emergency physicians. Indeed, it seems that the ED does not consider it important to be the subject of news, since two thirds of the responders preferred to be seen regardless of whether the news was negative.

From the point of view of the image of the ED, the future would seem to be promising since almost 90% of the department heads surveyed (53 out of 59) believed that the EDs are, or may be, a potential source of positive news (73%). In addition, most department heads had received or were receiving training in communication skills or recognised the importance of these skills. Finally, 95% of the hospitals have adequate structures for maintaining a good dialogue with the media, and thus, in the near future we should make maximum use of this potentiality and the means to achieve projection of the ED with the best image possible⁷⁻¹⁰.

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Repercusión mediática de los servicios de urgencias

Requena J

Objetivo: Conocer la opinión de los responsables de los servicios de urgencias (SU) acerca de la imagen proyectada por su servicio en los medios de comunicación, así como de las posibilidades mediáticas de dichos SU.

Método: Encuesta remitida a 140 responsables de SU del estado español, con representación de todos los niveles de complejidad.

Resultados: Respondieron 59 SU. El 88% había aparecido en algún medio de comunicación. En el 52% la noticia fue positiva, en el 25% fue negativa y en el 23% fue neutra. Estas noticias aparecieron en medios de ámbito local en el 87%; de ámbito regional en el 63% y de ámbito nacional en el 13%. La probabilidad de aparecer en medios de comunicación nacionales es superior para las noticias con connotación negativa respecto a las positivas ($p < 0,001$). El 41% de los encuestados creen que se debe aparecer en los medios de comunicación si la noticia es positiva, el 27% creen que se debería aparecer siempre con independencia de la connotación y el 32% creen que no se debiera aparecer nunca. El 73% de los SU participaban en actividades de proyección social y se observó que esta actitud reducía las posibilidades de ser fuente de noticias negativas ($p < 0,05$). La mayoría de los responsables entrevistados están formados en habilidades de comunicación o bien reconocen la importancia que tiene o creen que sus SU son o pueden llegar a ser una potencial fuente de noticias positivas y disponen en el hospital de estructuras adecuadas para mantener un buen diálogo con los medios de comunicación.

Conclusiones: Los SU con frecuencia son fuente de noticias positivas, y se puede incrementar esta buena imagen mediante estrategias dirigidas a esta finalidad. La mayoría de los responsables entrevistados son optimistas de cara a mejorar nuestra imagen. [Emergencias 2008;20:187-190]

Palabras clave: Urgencias. Noticias. Medios de comunicación.