

**CCBIO Opinion**

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# Cancer in the News



The issue of cancer and cancer drugs holds a considerable presence in the Norwegian media. The public interest in the issue has been especially persistent in recent years with the rise and alleged promise of precision medicine. Though cancer treatment becomes more personalized and, sometimes, more effective, increasingly many lives are lost to the illness as populations age and become more prone to cancer disease. Simultaneously, increasing amounts of public health budgets are devoted to cancer treatment, and the ensuing priority-setting dilemmas both engage and provoke within the general public. In the news, the issue of cancer and cancer drugs is thus cloaked in controversy, within a public discourse

that heavily emphasizes the tragic choices aspect of this issue.

An analysis of over 500 Norwegian newspaper articles on the issue of cancer and cancer drugs identified four premises which seemingly underlie the entire discourse: (1) cancer drugs are de facto expensive and we need not question why; (2) these drugs work, and there is no need to question their efficacy; (3) any health benefit for a cancer patient is an absolute good; whatever time can be won is a blessing, and there is no need to consider what shape that time will have; (4) patients and doctors own the truth about cancer and cancer drugs, and "outsider" perspectives are superfluous. A separate study on how

cancer research is presented in the news by actors within the field of cancer, as well as by journalists, proved that the framings are strongly influenced by what the actors themselves imagine to be a good and attainable future of cancer treatment. These visions, however, seem to be characterized by normative understandings of what the future should hold. Three main future visions proved prominent: (1) personalized medicine will revolutionize cancer treatment, (2) artificial intelligence will make diagnosis and treatment more efficient, and (3) cancer is Norway's next billion-dollar industry.

Our studies on the framing of cancer and cancer research in the news



suggest that the storytelling on cancer is considerably lacking in nuance. The adherence to the above-mentioned premises arguably contributes to false understandings both of what cancer research and new cancer treatments are, and of the promise they hold. This serves to increase the current discrepancy between public expectations, medical possibilities and financial constraints. Further, these framings do not devote adequate attention to the ethical and societal challenges that may arise from researchers' own unambiguously positive presentations of the future of cancer treatment. Overall, the framing of the issue seems to be derived from two fundamental assumptions; (1) that contemporary

cancer treatment is and must be an issue of tragic choices, within a healthcare system of winners and losers – between patients who gain access to new and expensive treatments, and those who are denied it. And (2) that cancer research and the future of cancer treatment remains an indubitable oasis of hope, with socio-technological imaginaries swarming with promise as a panacea for the tragedy that is cancer.

The general public's understanding of scientific progress – both its promise and its limits – on the issue of cancer and cancer drugs, is determined largely by its presentation in the news. In the current media climate, the framing of cancer stems from the above-mentioned

premises as well as scientists' own future visions, and is subsequently compounded by a deterministic and unnuanced journalistic presentation. This results in simplistic and faulty public understandings of the issue as a whole. It should be a central objective to researchers that their work is portrayed accurately and accountably in the media, and in a manner which provides the general public with an understanding of the real value of that research. In order to achieve this, researchers must strive for both awareness as well as ownership of how their findings are presented in the public discourse, and of flaws in this presentation. ••