



Angela L. Lanham  
Managing Editor  
West Virginia Medical Journal

25 November 2008

Dear Ms. Lanham:

I am writing to express my concern about a forthcoming article in your journal, the article is about smokeless tobacco use in West Virginia and is authored by Robert H. Anderson and others. The concern is not primarily that I believe that there are serious errors in the article, though from what I have read I do believe that. Responding to such errors is, of course, part of the scientific process and I expect to write a letter to the editor. The real problem is captured in the "what I have read" and "I expect to write" clauses: Apparently your journal has released the content of the article to the lay press before making it available to the scientific community.

For the last week, my colleagues and I have been trying to respond to news stories that make a number of erroneous claims that are attributed to an article in your journal. The large number of such stories makes it quite clear that you have actively pushed this article into the press before it was published. However, since that article is not actually available to the scientific community (thus the reason that I could not offer a title or full reference when citing the paper above) we really have no idea if the errors were in the original publication or if reporters were misinterpreting the information they received.

There is an embarrassing tendency in the health sciences to put out information to the popular press before it can be reviewed by the scientific community. But most often this takes the form of preliminary results that have been presented at a conference, and does not include the implicit credibility granted by reference to a (yet-unpublished and thus not available for critical review) journal article. In the present situation you are lending the reputation of your journal to flurry of press releases, but not allowing the scientific community to review what you have published. There seems to be more interest in generating sensational headlines than producing good science for careful consideration. I find this a very sad state of affairs for what should be part of the scientific enterprise, made a bit worse by the personal connection that my family is from West Virginia.

Sincerely,

Carl V Phillips, MPP PhD  
Associate Professor, University of Alberta School of Public Health  
TobaccoHarmReduction.org