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Short Communication

Effective media communication by a Forensic Medicine (Medico-legal) Expert

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Abstract

Clear and responsible interaction with the media is an essential duty of forensic medicine professionals involved in medico-legal work. While providing factual and scientifically supported information, experts must ensure confidentiality, follow ethical principles, and avoid expressing personal opinions or conclusions beyond established forensic evidence. Using simple and precise language helps the public understand complex medico-legal issues. Strict confidentiality must be maintained to protect victims, suspects, and sensitive details of ongoing investigations. Effective coordination with law enforcement agencies and judicial authorities is necessary to ensure that information released to the public is accurate, consistent, and does not interfere with legal proceedings or spread misinformation. Media interactions should be well prepared and, when necessary, conducted after consultation with legal advisors. All communication must remain objective, evidence-based, unbiased, and free from exaggeration or sensational presentation. This paper presents practical guidelines for media engagement by forensic professionals, drawing upon national standards such as the NMC Code of Ethics, ICMR Ethical Guidelines, and Press Council of India norms, as well as international frameworks including WHO communication principles and the AAFS Code of Ethics. These guidelines aim to preserve the integrity of investigations and strengthen public confidence in forensic science and the justice system.

1. Introduction

In the current media environment, medico-legal professionals are often asked to share expert views on legal cases, ethical issues, and public health matters. Forensic medicine specialists play an important role in supporting the justice system by providing accurate and scientifically reliable information.[1]

Communication with the media requires careful attention to factual correctness, confidentiality, and professional ethics. Incorrect or sensational reporting can create misunderstanding and mislead the public.[2] Therefore, forensic experts must develop appropriate communication skills to ensure responsible information sharing and to maintain professional credibility. Media coverage can influence public opinion, ongoing investigations, and court decisions. For this reason, medico-legal professionals should communicate in a clear, objective, and professional manner.[3]

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This article offers practical guidance for medico-legal experts on interacting with the media during medico-legal cases. The recommendations promote ethical and legally appropriate communication while safeguarding the integrity of investigations and fairness of legal processes. The guidelines are based on Indian regulations, such as the NMC Code of Ethics, ICMR Ethical Guidelines, and Press Council of India standards, as well as international frameworks including WHO communication principles and the AAFS Code of Ethics.[4-9]

2. Material and Methods

This study used a qualitative synthesis approach, reviewing literature, guidelines, and case examples on medico-legal media interactions. Sources included: guidelines from Indian bodies (NMC, ICMR, Press Council of India); international organizations (WHO, AAFS); peer-reviewed articles on forensic ethics and media; historical media reports on medico-legal cases; and expert opinions from forensic, legal, and media professionals.

Analysis involved thematic comparison of best practices, pitfalls, and policy frameworks, leading to evidence-based recommendations. No primary data collection (e.g., interviews) was conducted; synthesis focused on existing sources for guideline development.

3. Results and Observations

Analysis of literature and guidelines revealed common pitfalls in forensic experts' media interactions, observed across cases and reports:

1. Lack of preparation leading to misquotes or confusion.
2. Over-interpretation or speculation beyond evidence.
3. Premature disclosure interfering with investigations.
4. Breaches of confidentiality violating privacy laws/ethics.
5. Use of jargon confusing the public.
6. Pressure from media/deadlines causing rushed statements.
7. Conflicting public opinions eroding trust.
8. Speculation on motives/circumstances beyond evidence.
9. Ignoring potential legal consequences (e.g., inconsistencies with court testimony).

These align with observed risks in media reporting of medico-legal cases, per Press Council of India norms and forensic ethics literature.[6, 10,11]

4. Discussion

Forensic experts should communicate with the media in ways that follow both national (Indian) and international rules to promote ethical and careful practices. In India, the National Medical Commission (NMC) Code of Ethics[4] limits public comments that might look like advertising or attracting patients. Experts can share general information on public health issues, but they must avoid writing or speaking about diseases or treatments in ways that promote themselves. Keeping patient information private is a top priority.

Table no. 1: Comparison of Main Rules on Media Communication by Medico-legal and Healthcare Experts.

Aspect	National (India) Rules	International Rules	Key Observations and Suggestions
Confidentiality	Very strict (NMC, ICMR); no sharing of personal details publicly.	Strong focus on privacy (WHO, AAFS).	Always make this the first priority; work with relevant authorities.
What Can Be Said	Stick to verified facts and public health topics; no guesses (NMC, Press Council).	Base statements only on solid evidence; no false claims (AAFS).	Talk only about what is confirmed; do not offer legal judgments.
Preparation and Coordination	Match statements to ongoing investigations; get legal input if needed (Press Council).	Use preparation and official ways to share (WHO).	Check with legal or public relations teams; keep language neutral.
Effects on the Public	Avoid harming court cases or using dramatic styles (Press Council).	Build trust through accuracy (WHO).	Fix wrong reports when possible; add clear context.

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) Ethical Guidelines stress responsible behavior, protecting privacy, and sharing information accurately without misleading anyone.[5] The Press Council of India guidelines warn against reporting on crimes in ways that could harm ongoing investigations, such as by including details that suggest someone is guilty or by using sensational language.[6] The Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023, mainly deals with what evidence (including expert views) can be used in court. It highlights the need for caution in any public comments that might influence legal cases.[12]

Internationally, the World Health Organization (WHO) principles for communication focus on being open, quick, and trustworthy, especially in public health matters. These ideas apply to forensic experts when sharing findings.[7] The American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) Code of Ethics forbids members from making public statements that seem to speak for the organization

without permission and from misrepresenting facts or data.[9]

These rules show strong agreement on using only evidence-based facts while protecting privacy. Past problems show that not following these can spread false information and damage public trust. Experts should follow them closely, and linking them to real examples of mistakes can help improve understanding. Better combining of policies and more training for forensic experts would be useful. **Table no. 1** gives the comparison of Main Rules on Media Communication by Medico-legal and Healthcare Experts.

Guidelines for Medico-legal Experts in Media Interactions

1. Speak only to confirmed, evidence-based findings; avoid speculation on motives/legal conclusions.
2. Protect confidentiality per NMC/ICMR guidelines; no victim/suspect details.
3. Use simple, jargon-free language for public clarity.
4. Coordinate with authorities to avoid interfering with proceedings.
5. Review statements with legal advisors.
6. Maintain neutral, professional tone; avoid sensationalism.
7. Defer to official spokespersons in high-profile cases.
8. Provide context to prevent misinterpretation.
9. Explain forensic evidence limits (e.g., DNA identifies but not causation).
10. Correct misreporting via official channels.

5. Conclusion

Forensic medicine experts should communicate with the media carefully, objectively, and ethically. They must rely only on verified information, protect confidentiality, and follow established professional guidelines issued by bodies such as the NMC, ICMR, Press Council, WHO, and AAFS. This approach helps maintain the integrity of the justice system, protects the credibility of experts, and builds public trust. Clear and responsible communication can also reduce misinformation in high-profile cases, improve public understanding of forensic science, and strengthen cooperation between legal and medical fields. Future studies should assess how well these guidelines are applied using surveys or case-based analyses. There is also a need to develop training programs tailored to the Indian context. Including media ethics in forensic education may help prevent ethical risks in professional practice.

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