

EVENT SUMMARY
“What’s Next? Reporting on Health Reform
Between Now and 2014”

June 10, 2010

The Alliance for Health Reform, with support from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Association of Health Care Journalists, held a briefing at the National Press Club focusing on strategies reporters may employ to cover health reform going forward. The briefing clarified key points of confusion in the new health law, provided journalists with reporting resources, and offered suggestions for future story topics. Lastly, there was an opportunity for attendees to have their questions answered by a panel of experts.

Ed Howard, executive vice president at the Alliance for Health Reform, welcomed attendees on behalf of Senators Rockefeller and Collins, and thanked the speakers for their participation. Mr. Howard also thanked The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Association of Health Care Journalists for their sponsorship of the briefing, and noted both organizations’ important work in providing resources and story ideas for health reporters. In addition, he mentioned the Alliance’s updated sourcebook and the briefing kits as valuable resources for journalists.

Julie Rovner, health policy correspondent for National Public Radio, briefly mentioned her affiliation with the Association of Health Care Journalists and her new book *Health Care Politics and Policy A-Z*. Next, she shared some of the resources and websites she herself uses for research including, the Alliance sourcebook, the Kaiser Family Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Institute of Health Policy Center, and, on the conservative side, the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise and Cato Institute. She also noted key health care blogs including The Health Care Blog, the New America Foundation’s New Health Dialogue Blog and the Health Affairs Blog. In generating future health stories, she urged reporters to pick apart the reform law piece by piece, focusing stories on specific parts of the bill such as provisions affecting young adults or the CLASS Act. She also suggested readdressing topics through the lens of reform that have been written about previously, such as the impact of Medicaid changes on seniors and the implications of the Small Business Tax Credit on coverage spending for small businesses. Lastly, she prompted journalists to dig into less prominent, less covered topics -- provisions such as the tanning tax and mandates for chain restaurants to post calorie counts.

Next, **Phil Galewitz**, a correspondent with Kaiser Health News, stressed the similarity of topics in health reporting over the past 20 years and the importance of keeping stories fresh. With an emphasis on fresh stories, he prompted journalists to “follow the money” in health reform and the health field for story nuggets. Money-related topics include how teaching hospitals may be changing their workforces to take advantage of new funds for primary care, and how clinical laboratories are planning to meet the anticipated increase in demand for lab tests as a result of reform. Next, he stressed the importance of focusing on state actions, attending to implementation calendars for up-to-date story ideas (such as the upcoming implementation of the small business tax credit and high risk pools), and giving more focused coverage on topics traditionally covered by health journalists. In closing, he urged reporters to look for health stories in areas of conflict and to vigorously seek out available resources, like those of the Association of Health Care Journalists, to strengthen reporting.

Noam Levey, who covers healthcare policy for the Los Angeles Times—Tribune Washington Bureau, cautioned journalists against using hearsay in attempts to clarify confusion in reporting on the new health law. Rather, journalists should embrace the ambiguity and convey to readers that much is left unknown about the law's future implications, even among the legislatures who drafted the law. Reiterating Phil Galewitz's important point, he encouraged reporters to focus on the state level, noting insurance regulations and the readiness of states to take advantage of government opportunities as two sources of story topics. Specific to insurance regulations, reporters should pay attention to how premiums may change as a result of health reform and the state-by-state differences in regulating premium increases, and the small degree of power common in many states given to regulators to review and cap premium increases. In reporting on states' readiness to utilize funds from the federal government, he noted that several states have previously been slow to take full advantage of federal funding for public programs such as Medicaid. He said there are many story possibilities in following how quickly states plan to actually implement federally funded changes in the reform law that become fully available in 2014.

The final speaker, **Joanne Kenen**, the senior writer in the Health Policy Program at the New America Foundation, spoke to the current attitude of many editors that health care stories are either no longer necessary or only relevant as political stories. She suggested moving away from this outlook, using three of her own recent stories to provide journalists with examples that are both engaging for readership and fresh topics in health journalism. These story topics included the emergence of health policy majors in many colleges and universities, a story profiling differences among three generations of doctors in one family (especially noting the specialization and sub-specialization over time), and the current debate on “disclose and apologize” approach in dealing with malpractice as an alternative to the current emphasis on trying to avoid blame.

An informative question and answer session followed.