

## **This is how corporations and authorities manipulate the media with messages**

Martina Frei / December 27th, 2022

***Media releases do not serve the patients. The British medical journal no longer relies on it.***

The pharmaceutical company Biogen reported "highly significant results" for a drug against Alzheimer's on September 27, 2022 in a press release for investors [Pressemitteilung](#).

The "BBC" then reported on a "historic moment" «[BBC](#)». "Biogen achieves a breakthrough in Alzheimer's," headlined the "Finanz und Wirtschaft" «[Finanz und Wirtschaft](#)». The "Financial Times" praised the "success of the study" and the "New York Times" [New York Times](#) wrote in large letters: "Alzheimer's drug slows down mental deterioration in a key study".

For years there have been setbacks in therapy candidates for Alzheimer's disease. Now there are positive results for a new antibody," reported the "Ärztezeitung" [Ärztezeitung](#) under the headline "Alzheimer: Lecanemab improves cognitive [mental] impairments in phase III study." She reported an improvement of "a relative 27 percent. According to the manufacturer, the effect was "highly statistically significant" after just six months."

### **"Tiny difference", not recognizable for patients and caregivers**

Around two months after the media howls of triumph, on November 29, 2022, the study appeared in the "New England Journal of Medicine" (NEJM) [New England Journal of Medicine](#), the results of which had already been anticipated in the press release. Now the experts learned more details.

"The data showed that lecanemab made a tiny difference in mental decline over 18 months which, although statistically significant, is not clinically significant as it is not discernible to patients, caregivers or physicians," summarized the British Medical Journal» (BMJ) [British Medical Journal](#) the results together.

Not only did lecanemab have no noticeable effect, it also caused side effects almost twice as often as the placebo. The study, published in the NEJM, showed that 6.9 percent of those treated with the drug stopped treatment because of side effects, compared with 2.9 percent in the group that received placebo.

**«Great announcements without scientific data»**

"The press release has become a tool of the propagandists," wrote Kamran Abbasi, the editor-in-chief of the "BMJ" [BMJ](#), back in July 2022. "We saw this regularly at the height of the pandemic: great announcements of successful new treatments and strategies, without any scientific Study or data supporting the hyperbolic claims."

Lecanemab is not an isolated case. On November 1, 2022, Pfizer issued a press release in which the pharmaceutical company announced the interim results of a study of a vaccine against RSV for expectant mothers [Pressemitteilung](#). The "Times" wrote of a "game changing vaccine" that could save thousands of babies - without knowing exactly what the study revealed. Because it wasn't available at the time [Times](#).

The "BMJ" wanted to know from Pfizer, which is why it published the interim results in a press release. The group's response: The "topline data was considered essential for the company." More data would be collected, which would then be published in the form of a presentation or peer-reviewed article.

### **"Brash and dishonest," but usual**

Not only pharmaceutical companies, but also governments first send out press releases and - after the media reports have appeared - add more detailed information. The "BMJ" shows this in a strategy paper by the British government on women's health

«Newspapers and magazines were forced to give credence to the claims made in the press release. These media tactics are brazen and dishonest. It minimizes the criticism and reinforces the messages of the press release. Unfortunately, it's now commonplace," said the editor-in-chief of the BMJ. "It's a form of communication that serves the companies and their shareholders, not the patients or the doctors who are trying to treat them." Using media releases instead of full data is an "abuse of power," Abbasi said. [Missbrauch der Macht](#)

Calling on other media to follow suit

The "BMJ" [BMJ](#) drew the consequences in July: It no longer reports on "non-substantial" press releases and refrains from reporting as long as important information is missing from the editors' point of view. If the paper were to take up a media release, then «we would make it clear that we only had the press release and why we decided to publish it anyway. We hope others will follow us," Abbasi wrote.

It would be even more consistent if news agencies and media only reported on studies that also disclosed raw data or the much more detailed datasets that drug regulators receive .

Because it has been shown time and again in the past that what is presented to the professional world as a study result is by no means always what can really be derived from the data [längst nicht immer das ist](#). This emerges, for example, from an article in "BMJ Evidenced-based Medicine" [BMJ Evidenced-based Medicine](#).

Be it antidepressants, diabetes or asthma medication, the flu drug Tamiflu, medicines for cancer or HIV: If scientists were actually able to compare the published and non-public information on this, it often came out that the published studies presented the effects and / or side effects of drugs.

### **First the press release, a month later the specialist publication**

If, for example, the pharmaceutical company Pfizer had been obliged to make the data from the large Covid vaccination study public from the start, some doubts could have been dispelled - or possibly even confirmed. Here, too, the pharmaceutical manufacturers advanced with a media release: On November 9, 2020, Pfizer/Biontech published a press release that made the headlines worldwide. The good news was that the Covid vaccination was over 90 percent effective [Pressemitteilung](#).

The percentage given raised high expectations. However, what was missing for classification was additional information on risk reduction in absolute numbers, which is common in evidence-based medicine (Infosperber reported). The fact that this fabulous effectiveness only lasted for a short period of time, that it was unclear at this point how long the vaccination would last and what long-term side effects could occur, was largely lost in the media hype. Likewise, various critical objections that raised doubts as to whether all the data in this study had been collected and evaluated seriously [Einwände Zweifel](#)

### **"The forecast 95 percent was far exaggerated"**

The specialist publication in the "New England Journal" [New England Journal](#) followed about a month after the press release. She confirmed the statements in the press release, but did not dispel the doubts, especially since other points that raised questions [Zweifel weitere Punkte bekannt wurden](#) (Infosperber reported) [Infosperber](#)

"The forecast 95 percent was far exaggerated," said Franz Allerberger recently in an interview in "Profil" [Profil](#). Allerberger was part of the advisory staff of the Corona Task Force in the Austrian Ministry of Health and was Head of the Public Health Department of the Austrian State Agency for Health and Food Safety (AGES) until his retirement last year.

Original article in German:

<https://www.infosperber.ch/medien/medienkritik/so-manipulieren-konzerne-und-behoerden-medien-mit-mitteilungen/>