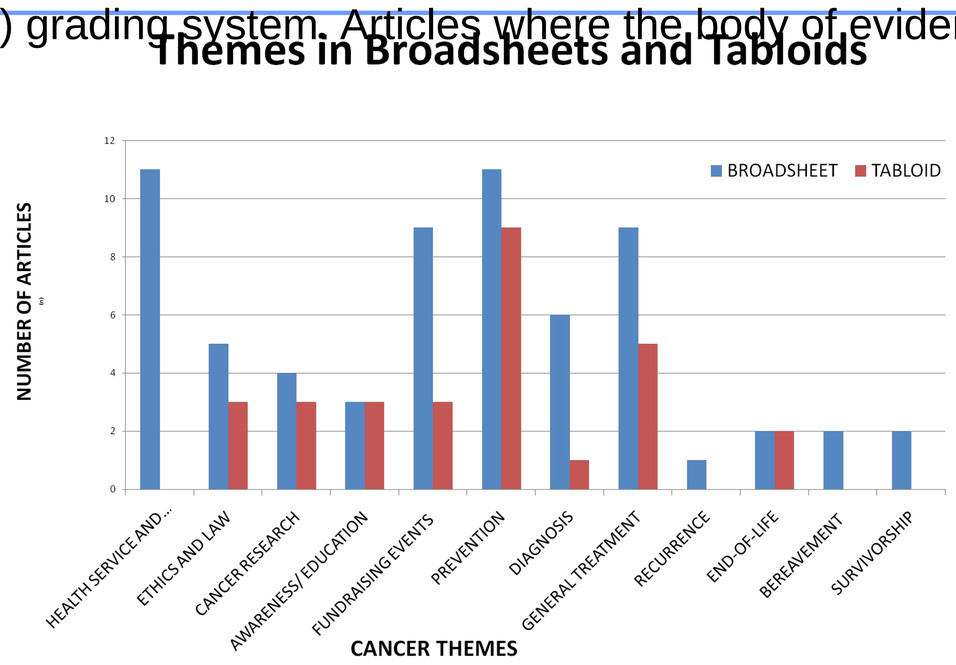
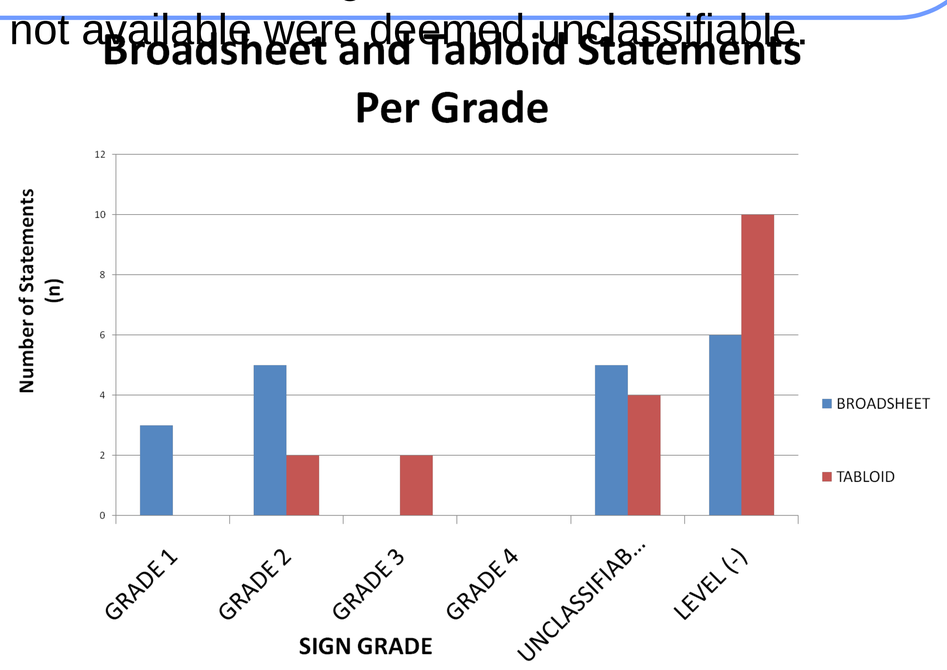
Coverage of Cancer in the Irish Print Media

Fionnuala Frain[1], Anita O'Donovan[1],
[1]Applied Radiation Therapy Trinity, Discipline of Radiation Therapy, School of Medicine, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.

Introduction The media are known to be effective influencers of public opinion. Through the quantity and quality of news coverage, the media can inform an audience and set an agenda[1]. Public health behaviours and knowledge of cancer prevention may be influenced by their exposure to information printed in the media. Previous studies on cancer-related reporting in other countries demonstrate a greater emphasis on treatment and research themes than prevention, with breast cancer consistently dominating site specific coverage.[2] Patients may have misconceptions regarding cancer previous to their diagnosis and these may be exacerbated by inaccurate, poor quality information reported in the print media.[3] There is a lack of literature examining the reporting of cancer by the Irish media. This study aims to investigate Irish newspaper articles by identifying themes, assessing treatment modality coverage, determining anatomical site frequency and grading the quality of information reported within articles of the most common theme.

Methods The highest circulation and readership figures of national newspapers were acquired. Based on availability on the LexisNexis database, 5 daily and 3 Sunday editions were studied. The term 'Cancer' was searched in newspaper articles over a 1 year period. Exclusion criteria was applied. Constructed week sampling[4], a method of constructing one week per 3 month season, representative of a year period, and further exclusion criteria reduced number of articles from 4130 to 101 articles. Quantitative content analysis was used to calculate cancer-related thematic content. Thematic templates, acquired from similar studies and articles were assigned a theme based on content .[2] Quality of articles within the most common theme (Prevention) was assessed by searching individual statements within articles in PubMed database, assigning a grade to the body of evidence behind each statement. Grading system used was based on the Scottish Intercollegiate Guideline Network (SIGN) grading system. Articles where the body of evidence was not available were deemed unclassifiable.





Results *Sample:* Broadsheet Editions produced the majority of articles between them (64%). *Themes:* Prevention (20%) and general treatment (14%) dominated. Survivorship, end-of-life and recurrence received the least attention collectively (<10%). *Treatment Modality:* Radiation therapy received the most coverage (38%), Surgery alone and in combination with chemotherapy received 14%. Neither Chemotherapy alone nor Hormone therapy were discussed. *Site:* Of 82 anatomical sites recorded, Breast was most commonly mentioned(28%), followed by Brain(17.5%), Lung (11%) and Prostate (6%). Colorectal and Skin received just 1% each. *Quality:* Overall level of evidential support in prevention articles was poor with 49% of statements based on low levels of evidence and 24% were unclassifiable. Only 27% were based on high levels of evidence.

Discussion The high number of prevention articles is encouraging for health promotion however in this sample, recommendations are more likely to be based on lower levels of evidence. The issue of under-representation of prostate, colorectal and skin cancers is evident in this sample. It is concerning the most commonly diagnosed sites receive a lack of coverage compared to their incidence in the population. Limitations in this study include a high risk of bias. It is optimal to have more than one person coding data, inter-coder reliability using kappa statistics could then be assessed. Quality assessment also contained a high risk of bias. Ideally, all the articles in the year period should be analysed.

Conclusions Disparities exist within the cancer information reported in Irish newspapers. Gender bias is seen in the under-reporting of prostate cancer relative to breast cancer. This gap must be addressed. The public should be wary of following information concerning cancer prevention in Irish newspapers, as it appears to be based on lower levels of evidence, however further study is required to confirm these results.

ARTT
Applied Radiation Therapy Trinity Research Group

REFERENCES
1. Collins PA, Abelson J, Pyman H, Lavis JN. Are we expecting too much from print media? An analysis of newspaper coverage of the 2002 Canadian healthcare reform debate. Social Science & Medicine. 2006;63(1):89-102.
2. Slater MD, Long M, Bettinghaus EP, Reineke JB. News coverage of cancer in the United States: A national sample of newspapers, television, and magazines. Journal of Health Communication. 2008 ;13(6):523-37.
3.Fishman J, Ten T,,Casarett D, Cancer and the Media : How does the media report on treatment and outcomes? Arch Intern Medical;2010.p.515-8
4 Riffe D, Aust CF, Lacy SR. The Effectiveness of Random, Consecutive Day and Constructed Week Sampling in Newspaper Content Analysis.Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly. 1993;70(1):133-9.

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN