

## Newspaper representations of hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) and cancer in a Malaysian newspaper

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### Abstract

*The present study examines newspaper coverage of hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) and cancer; to compare how infectious and non-infectious diseases are represented in Malaysia. The Health Belief Model was used as the framework for selecting themes relevant to health actions for the content analysis of 69 articles (32,808 words in total) from the New Straits Times. It was found that more emphasis was given to HFMD (51 articles) than to cancer (18 articles). The information most frequently included in the articles was recommended health actions (3.8 mentions per article for HFMD; 1.1 for cancer). The articles represented HFMD as posing a greater threat than cancer, as more information on susceptibility (1.6 for HFMD; 0.3 for cancer) was included compared to severity (0.5 for HFMD; 0.2 for cancer). The HFMD articles stressed the outbreak of HFMD: incidence and deaths, symptoms, causes and preventive measures. However, the cancer articles were usually not incident-specific and focused on promoting a healthy lifestyle to avoid cancer and to warn readers of cancer prevalence. Only 17% of the cancer articles carried treatment themes. The findings suggest that news coverage of cancer should include medical research and advances to create better awareness of cancer.*

*Keywords: cancer; content analysis; hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD); Health Belief Model; media; newspapers*

### 1. Introduction

News media such as newspapers not only communicate information but also shape public opinions and the formation of attitudes through the selection and framing of news content (McCombs *et al.* 2011). This includes reports relating to health (Adelman and Verbrugge 2000; Hellyer and Haddock-Fraser 2011); public health personnel rely on media including newspapers to alert the public to threats posed by diseases and to protective measures (e.g. Lawrence *et al.* 2008; Miyawaki *et al.* 2017), and researchers have explored newspaper representation of health issues such as binge drinking (Patterson *et al.* 2016), suicide (Mahesar 2018) and prohibition of smoking in private vehicles carrying children (Patterson *et al.* 2015). However, studies have found different emphases in newspaper articles on infectious diseases and non-communicable diseases like cancer, and this is the focus of the current paper in the context of newspapers in Malaysia.

Newspaper representation of infectious diseases, including Ebola, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), Zika and tuberculosis is inclined towards spreading fear of new diseases ahead of giving assurances of containment (Washer 2004, 2006; Lawrence *et al.* 2008; Abeyasinghe 2016; Ribeiro *et al.* 2018). In Malaysia, Ting and Jerome (2017) found that airport banners represented