

Representation Of Lung Cancer in Online Malaysian Newspapers

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Received: 23 September 2023 | Accepted: 14 November 2023 | Published: 1 December 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajress.2023.5.4.13>

Abstract: *The study examined the representation of lung cancer in online Malaysian newspapers published in English. The objectives were to: (1) compare the frequency of information on severity, susceptibility, recommended actions, benefits and barriers in the newspapers; and (2) describe themes and sub-themes of these Health Belief Model constructs. The 12 online newspaper articles (2 New Strait Times, 4 The Star, 1 The Borneo Post and 5 The Sun) were analysed using the Health Belief Model. There were 89 instances of information on lung cancer. The newspaper articles crafted the threat of lung cancer through emphasis on severity (25.84%) and susceptibility (23.60%), particularly death statistics and tobacco smoking as a risk factor. The articles also recommended the public to take health protective actions (19.10%), and dealt with benefits (16.85%) and barriers (14.61%) to adoption of these behaviours. A chi-square test of independence showed significant differences among the newspapers on the frequency of information on severity, susceptibility, recommended actions, benefits, and barriers. However, the newspaper articles were similar in the highlight on the key benefits which were reducing deaths, improved health, and good treatment outcomes, and barriers which were inadequate knowledge and addiction. Half of the recommended actions to counter lung cancer were about the proposed tobacco ban for those born after 2005, and the rest were policy implementation issues, lifestyle changes and self-education. The study suggests that there is need for diversity of information on lung cancer in the media for better public health education.*

Keywords: lung cancer, risk factors, severity, cues to action, smoking, tobacco, newspaper

1. Introduction

The threat posed by a disease depends on the perceived probability of contracting the disease and perceived severity of consequences of having the disease. Smoking is the biggest cause of lung cancer (Cancer Research UK, 2023a). Other risk factors of lung cancer are genetic susceptibility, poor diet, occupational exposures, and air pollution (Malhotra et al., 2016). One less known cause is radon gas (Vogeltanz-Holm et al., 2018). Radon comes from radioactive decay of rocks and soil containing uranium and thorium (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2022).

Research has identified some demographic characteristics as lung risk factors. The lung cancer risk is higher among older people, particularly those aged 45 and above, and the highest risk is for the 60-74 age group (Rajadurai et al., 2020). Rajadurai et al. (2020) also reported that Malaysian males are at higher risk of getting lung cancer than females (1 in 55 compared to 1

in 136 respectively). The lung cancer risk varies by ethnic group. Among the Malaysian males, the Chinese are at the highest risk (1 in 43), followed by Malays (1 in 62) and Indians (1 in 103) (Rajadurai et al., 2020). Therefore, the demographic contributions to lung cancer cases differ.

The consequences of having lung cancer are dire. The early signs of lung cancer include persistent coughing, chest pain, shortness of breath, wheezing, coughing up blood, feeling very tired all the time, and weight loss with no known cause (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Lung cancer can result in fatality. In Malaysia, the third highest cancer incidence is for lung cancer, and the survival rate is the lowest compared to other cancers (Murugesan, 2022). This is partly because nearly 90% of lung cancer cases in Malaysia are diagnosed at stage III or IV (Rajadurai et al., 2020). The late diagnosis can be due to lack of awareness. In a survey of 1,895 Malaysians, Schliemann et al. (2020) found that females, younger people, Malays, married people, and people with formal education have better knowledge of cancer. Not surprisingly, cancer survivors, and people who have either not smoked or stopped smoking reported better knowledge of cancer. Schliemann et al.'s (2020) findings concur with Rajadurai et al. (2020) on predisposition to lung cancer based on demographic characteristics.

If lung cancer can be detected at an earlier stage, treatment outcomes would be more positive. Lung cancer screening includes low-dose CT scans which reveal small lesions in lungs. The more confirmatory tests are: (1) imaging tests where X-rays may reveal an abnormal mass or nodule; (2) sputum cytology whereby lung cancer cells can be seen under the microscope; and (3) biopsy whereby a needle is used to extract a sample of cells from the lungs for examination of abnormality (Mayo Clinic, 2022). X-rays are common but the public may not be familiar with other tests.

The Malaysian government and NGOs have been active in running awareness campaigns. Examples are “Knowing Lung Cancer” campaign by Roche Malaysia (F. Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd, 2023), and “Hope for Survival” by Lung Cancer Network Malaysia (2023). These lung cancer awareness programmes target internet users. Besides websites, traditional means of spreading awareness include posters, billboards, and newspapers. Newspaper is a key channel of disseminating information to the public about low-dose CT lung cancer screening and plays an important role to educate the public about this cancer screening service (Zippi et al., 2023). Zippi et al. (2023) analysed 895 articles in the U.S. newspapers (2010-2022) and found that an emphasis on screening for early detection of lung cancer. A total of 52% of articles provided information on lung cancer screening enrollment criteria, and 27% emphasised annual CT scans. In comparison, only 28% highlighted smoking cessation programmes, a preventive measure. The newspaper articles also addressed financial barriers for lung cancer screening (33%) and distrust of medical results (23%) but 64% of news articles promoted benefits of lung cancer screening, predominantly early detection or possible cure of lung cancer. As for Malaysia, our literature search revealed that media representation of lung cancer has not been studied. Thus, there is a knowledge gap on the salience given to lung cancer in Malaysian newspapers.

The study examined the representation of lung cancer threat in online Malaysian newspapers published in English. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. compare the frequency of information on severity, susceptibility, recommended actions, benefits and barriers in the four selected newspapers; and