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Health Policy Forums

The Challenges of Health Reporting

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Maiken Scott
WHYY

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One of the most important aspects of understanding current health and related policy issues is having a mechanism of communication and a public exchange of news and ideas. The media plays a critical role in elevating complex health care issues in a way that is tangible to listeners and viewers. At a recent Forum, WHYY health reporters Taunya English and Maiken Scott treated us to a unique behind the scenes look at their work and experiences.

"When I look out into the audience, every single one of your faces is a news story." That is how Taunya English kicked off the morning with her engaging manner. English is a health reporter with a special interest in population and community health. She covers stories across the region as well policy issues at the state and federal level.

English provided an overview of radio, TV, and web programs of WHYY including: *Morning Edition, All Things Considered, NewsWorks Tonight, First, and newsworks*. WHYY has a team of four working on health care stories, which English describes as "unheard of" in the field. Having a dedicated team covering health care stories sets WHYY apart from other media and enables the team to cover a diverse range of topics.

A typical week at WHYY may include stories such as: lead-absorbing grass; meditation for teachers; care transitions; vaccinations; walkable neighborhoods; medical marijuana; raw milk controversy; and autism prevalence in New Jersey. English shared an example of a story she worked on about an urban farmer who is working creatively to impact the health and lives of the community through the production of and access to healthier produce. English loves stories about innovators and renegades.

Maiken Scott followed with a very forthcoming presentation about her experiences. Scott is a behavioral health reporter who has covered a range of topics such as new treatments for depression, the impact of foster care, and the portrayal of mental illness in pop culture. She is also the executive producer of the highly acclaimed weekly mental health program, *Voices in the Family with Dan Gottlieb.*

Staying current and communicating effectively is one of the primary challenges faced by health reporters. Scott described the challenge of striking a balance the between the scientific information and the information that is deconstructed for the general public.

Because her work primarily focuses on mental and behavioral health, Scott strives to bring these often serious and sad stories to life. It is extremely important to her to get these patient/client stories "right." When preparing for an interview, she feels it is her job to create a comfortable yet intimate platform with a complete stranger. She tries to factor in time, reassure, comfort, and *listen*. "I try to focus on the love and compassion I have for that person," Scott explains.

Scott also discussed the stress of this type of reporting and her personal emotions around it. She openly described her own transformations and responses to different experiences. Scott poignantly states, "the story the person has given to me is a treasure…I carry it."

For more information on WHYY programming visit: http://www.whyy.org/