

## Media Release

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### **Consumer products unfairly labelled as cancer causing** **New research shows media stories lead to misplaced anxiety**

**GOLD COAST: Australians are being subjected to unjustified speculation about consumer products causing cancer because the reporting process favours 'worst case' headlines, according to a new study released today.**

International carcinogens expert, Professor Bernard Stewart, will tell the Clinical Oncological Society of Australia's Annual Scientific Meeting today (17/11) that comment made in reputable, peer-reviewed journals is progressively scaled up to provoke alarm by the time the information reaches the public.

Professor Stewart, from the University of NSW Faculty of Medicine and South East Sydney Illawarra Health, assessed 100 recent print media reports, covering cancer causation by consumer products, food contaminants, occupational exposure, environmental pollution and risk-related behaviour.

"Many of the reports headlined unrecognised carcinogens or suggested carcinogenic risk, yet this was not the focus of the original research findings," Professor Stewart said. "Consumers were given the impression they needed to be overly vigilant, though cancer causation had not occurred and often seemed very unlikely."

Professor Stewart said that in relation to consumer products, there was no evidence of carcinogenic risk warranting advice beyond using the product in accordance with the instructions. "A typical example involved mothballs being proclaimed a 'cancer scare' on the basis of cellular growth control processes being altered by an organic compound," he said.

According to Professor Stewart, the problem was not media deliberately distorting research findings, but misinterpretation due to the number of players in the reporting process. "It is akin to Chinese whispers," he said. "From the media release written by the institutional press officer, to the journalist trying to simplify often complex research, to the sub-editor coming up with an attention-grabbing headline, the message is gradually altered to centre upon the likelihood of cancer."

Professor Stewart said journals should be more responsible in publicising investigator speculation, journalists needed to ensure novel findings were placed in context, and sub-editors needed to take care not to inadvertently sensationalise preliminary observations.

[Professor Stewart will present his research at 4.40pm today \(Nov 17\) at the Clinical Oncological Society of Australia Annual Scientific Meeting. Meeting room 8, Gold Coast Convention Centre.](#)

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