

SPARK: Conversations

Podcasts and interviews with leaders in child health
on issues that matter.

Season 3 - Episode 07

Child Health in the Media: A Snapshot on the Media
Representation of Child Health



With special guest:
Carly Weeks

Transcript: Child Health in the Media

Connected by purpose. Driven by passion. This is Children's Healthcare Canada's Spark: Conversations podcast series.

Katharine: Welcome to Spark Conversations, Children's Healthcare Canada's monthly podcast series. At the crossroads of children's healthcare, system improvement, and leadership, SPARK: Conversations is a solution-focused podcast that connects the child and youth health community with system leaders, who tackle wicked problems and discuss ideas to inform the development of innovative and integrated systems serving children and youth. SPARK: Conversations is one component of our SPARK Knowledge Mobilization Program. SPARK is the Shared Platform for Advocacy, Research, and Knowledge.

I'm Dr. Katherine Smart and today I'm absolutely delighted to be speaking with Carly Weeks. Carly is an award winning national reporter who's been covering health for the Globe and Mail for more than a decade. Carly helped lead the paper's coverage of COVID-19 and its effects on the health system. She also writes about the intersection of misinformation and health.

I've had the opportunity to be interviewed myself by Carly many times over the last couple of years, so I'm excited to be able to turn the tables on her today. Today we are going to be chatting about an extremely important topic child health in the media. So hello, Carly, and welcome to Spark Conversations.

Carly: It's so nice to be here. Thank you for having me.

Katharine: We know that you have established a reputation as a fearless journalist with a passion for shining a spotlight on the health and healthcare related topics that matter to Canadians. We all have a vested interest in health care and Canadians are more informed, engaged and interested in health than ever before. In a world in which we are increasingly surrounded by myths, misinformation and lies that threaten to keep us misinformed. You

specialize in finding the hidden stories, you provide a healthy dose of reality through your writing and debunk myths on a variety of health related topics. You have a unique and diverse experience and perspective. And we are so excited to have you on the show today to tell us more about it. So thank you for joining us. And I'm looking forward to learning a bit more about you and the work that you've done.

So before we dig into things, I'm going to start off with a few rapid fire questions. So both myself and our listeners can get to know a little bit more about Carly the person. So if that's okay with you, Carly, we're gonna jump into it.

Carly: I'm ready.

Katharine: Okay, awesome. So who has had the biggest influence on your career? And why?

Carly: That's a good question. I'd say probably a couple. So I think my brother probably had the biggest influence on my career in terms of helping get me to where I am, he is my older brother who pushed me to get into journalism school, I always knew I wanted to be a writer, but kind of I think without his leadership, I probably wouldn't have made it for a variety of reasons. It was just really helpful to have someone there to help steer me in the right direction, and help me with like, really complicated applications.

And, and I think also throughout my career, you know, people who've been a real sounding board, a real Guiding Light have been there, there's many of them. But one of the ones that stands out the most is Andre Picard, who, you know, has become a real legend in Canadian journalism for all of the right reasons. And you know, he's had a career longer than most journalists out there today, regardless of where they're working. And he has been someone who's always stayed really true to the principles of journalism and has broken so many stories about health and really shown us what true the true power I think of health journalism, good health journalism can be.

Katharine: Yeah, absolutely. I think like you said, he's a real Canadian icon in that, that space. And I'm sure it's exciting for him to see people like yourself following in his footsteps.

What is the biggest life lesson you have taken away from being a journalist?

Carly: Oh, there's, there's many, there's many. And I think, you know, I chat often with colleagues, some who've left the profession, and we remark on how there really is no career like journalism, your kind of, you know, you've become a bit of an expert in a bunch of different things. You're always the observer watching, seeing how people react to learning about how other people work. And I think, you know, one of the one of the lessons you definitely learn is sort of how to read people, you know, who might be not completely forthcoming, who's not

giving you the full story. And so I think it is it helps you become a really good judge of character, which is something that can be applied in the real world in in a in a positive and really helpful kind of way. So that's probably the biggest one I applied my personal life, but also, you know, just really staying true to your principles and, and working really hard. That's another one you just kind of have to learn in journalism.

Katharine: I can't imagine because you never know when the next door is going to be or what's going to break or when they're going to need you so I can imagine it can be very unpredictable.

What is the one thing right now that you think about that you feel deeply grateful for?

Carly: I would say without a doubt my family and you know, I think through everything we've all been through in the last three years in this. You know, like daily as a health reporter, you kind of hear about some of the horror stories that have gone on behind the scenes in health care. And, you know, so many people who've had really hard times. And so it makes me really grateful for having, you know, a roof over my head and two healthy children. You know, we have we all have our own challenges in life, but when you're looking at the way some people have had have really struggled in the last three years, it's hard not to feel grateful when, you know, things are knock on wood relatively okay, in your neck of the woods.

Katharine: Yeah, absolutely. So true. So bringing things back a bit to children and children's health care. What do you think right now is the number one thing we need to be considering to move Children's Healthcare forward in a positive direction?

Carly: I mean, I think that it's interesting, you know, we talk so much in every circle about how important children are, and of course, they really are. But I think that, you know, we've we don't often talk enough about how they're being shortchanged in terms of the way the health care system has sort of been set up, and the way things have been funded in recent years. You know, it was during the summer, when I was doing a lot of reporting on some of the problems in children's health institutions and backlogs and things like that, it really became quite clear that a lot of decisions that get made in health are made around you know, what's best for adults, aka voters. And you know, I don't think that people are sort of trying to deny children, you know, essential health care and timely diagnoses, et cetera, et cetera.

But I think that sort of is the way things have happened. And I think that, you know, in terms of getting things, moving things forward, and helping to see things change, you know, media does play an important role. And I think that one of the, one of the most important things is really continuing to shine a light, you know, whether it's, you know, the CEOs of hospitals, or healthcare organizations, or parents, really trying to tell some of those heartbreaking stories. And that's not to say we're trying to, you know, exploit the tragedy that people are facing, but

that by, by kind of really coming out there and forcefully showing people what is truly going on behind the scenes, you know, the damaging effects of forcing children to wait months longer than necessary for surgery, or, you know, families who are simply unable to access services, to help their children with developmental conditions, I think that we just do not hear enough about those really tragic stories and how children are, are being essentially failed by the system.

Because we're just, we just don't hear enough about them. And I think that's one of the key areas in terms of continuing to make sure children are put, you know, for lack of a better analogy, you know, in the front of the paper, you know, or on every newscast just really trying to rally support around this very important cause. And again, like sort of a long winded answer, but I think we, you know, if it was the CEO, I think of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario who said many times, you know, children are not little adults. And you know, every time there's a sort of a tragic, you know, circumstance falling on a child, we need to think about every single thing that could have been done differently to prevent that. We're not necessarily doing enough of that in Canada.

Because I think it's so important, of course, and I think just if I can add, I think, you know, in the last couple of months, with the emergency sort of crisis level, kind of maybe dissipating slightly at children's hospitals, we've already kind of started to stop talking about them as much in media and things like that. And you can sort of see how that happened. So I think it's important to keep those stories coming out there. And really, I think it came as news to a lot of people, I think people were frankly, really surprised to hear that children are not getting what they need. Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. And it's important to keep reminding people of that for sure

Katharine: No, I so agree. And what I often worry about as well, as I think, you know, as you said, we've we've been having this healthcare crisis for so long that people can get almost numb to it. You just kind of Oh, yeah, the healthcare system is not great. And I think you're right, it's telling people stories, it's things that people you know, other Canadians can really relate to, or can pull at their heartstrings or just really, you know, allow them to put themselves in someone else's shoes. I think that's often what really compels people to take an interest in something. So I agree with you, I think the the work of the media to really highlight what's happening to children and in the children's healthcare space, is so critical, so that the, you know, your average adult Canadian who's a voter doesn't forget just how serious these issues are, and that it sort of sits with them. So thank you for being part of doing that.

Katharine: So I myself have always been fascinated by journalism and journalists. I think you guys do amazing work and it's really interesting. So I think I would love to know and I think our listeners would love to know a bit more about you and your journey and how you ended up where you are now in the role that you have at the Globe and Mail.

Carly: Oh, that's it's a fun one to tell because, you know, my my mom was a really early influence. I was a kid I never did, you know, dancing or piano lessons. But my mom told me that you're really good at writing. So I actually set out to write my first children's book at age nine. And I tried to get a publisher and the yellow pages in Sioux Sainte Marie Ontario, there weren't too many. But basically, from then on, I knew I was going to be a writer someday. And it wasn't until probably in university, I really realized what I wanted to do was be a newspaper writer, I did write for my local paper growing up as a teen writer, I worked at my student newspaper at Queen's University.

And so from there on, it was a real natural fit. I mean, it's, it's a really hard business to get into, it was a lot of hard work and sacrifice, and yet working really, really hard. But I was one of those lucky people that always knew this is what I want to do. And I just had to figure out how to get there. And in getting there is really, I tell that to a lot of journalism students now it is a tough going, it's tougher, even more so now. But you know, basically, applying for every internship, there's a bit there is available, you know, packing up your stuff and moving cities multiple times. And I guess when you're that young, you don't really even think about it, you just kind of do it, or at least I did. But it was yeah, it was a time of great change and hard work. And then eventually, I applied for a job as a Globe and Mail and got it. And I was thrilled because that was my dream. Since I would say, well, since I was a teenager, I would be at the not just any newspaper, but I would be at the Globe and Mail. So 15 years on it's a dream come true to actually be here.

Katharine: Well, that's fantastic. What a great story. And I think you dated yourself a bit with the Yellow Pages reference. We won't focus on that too much.

Carly: Yeah, totally. I know, I remember before the internet that it's a scary thought to even say out loud.

Katharine: But yeah, but it's a fantastic paper. And it's wonderful to have you there doing what you do. So we know the media, of course, both traditional and social media plays a massive role in influencing public thinking and public awareness. You've spoken a little bit about how you see the role of the media in helping us address challenges in our healthcare system. But can you tell us a little bit more about how you envision that going forward? And how can those of us in that stakeholder community sort of be partnering with the media to make sure that we're bringing these challenges to the forefront?

Carly: Yeah, definitely. I mean, journalists, we often talk about how our job is to really afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted, you know, hold powerful people to account and shine a light in areas that people wouldn't otherwise hear about, you know, that's everything they say everything else, if you're not sort of making someone uncomfortable, or exposing someone

exposing something that that people need to hear about everything else is sort of public relations. And, you know, I think that's true, that is still true to an extent.

But I think that you know, what that really means the point of all of this is that there's, there's so many stories out there that we only hear about through, you know, organizations who, you know, represent children who can talk to parents and give us really important stories, and there's so much news, anyone out there can attest, you know, there's just so much information coming at us all the time.

And as journalists, it is a challenge, a daily challenge to sort of wade through a sea of pitches and emails and breaking news, to try and distill that into something that makes sense for people to try and bring them the stories that matter. And so I think that, you know, when it comes to, say, talking about stories that matter to kids, to the health of children, to lack of access to services, that is where I think media organizations, like journalists, like myself, like hearing from places that have their ear to the ground, you know, because I can only talk to so many people in a day or, you know, read so many pitches in a day, and we're all kind of wading through all of this information.

So it becomes essential to kind of hear from people who are talking to the, to the families that are being affected, and to the real people that we sort of call them in the business like real people, what is happening to them, that is where some of the key work, I think can be done and often is done, you know, in terms of getting those stories out to people that, you know, it's one thing to write about, you know, hospitals being overrun.

And we've certainly run plenty of those stories in the last three years, you know, hospitals are overwhelmed, and shutting down. But often the stories that really stick with people are when there is a human element, you know, when there is a physician who is describing sort of the personal toll that this is taking, or you know, a family who have lost a loved one because of a wait time in an emergency room, which has unfortunately become a fairly frequent occurrence.

So I think that, you know, stakeholders know what's going on in their sector in their, you know, in their area, and they can connect journalists with the people who have the really sort of heartbreaking stop in your tracks, pay attention stories that can break through some of that noise. And I think that's where some of the key work can be done going forward. Not to mention, you know, there's a lot of experts in the field who can offer really good perspectives. Sometimes in the media, we are sort of, you know, made fun of or kind of criticized rightly so. for relying on the same voices to fill in the blanks to tell us those stories.

And I think that's another area where media can talk to some stakeholders and stakeholder groups, organizations about finding some new voices, people that represent different communities, diverse communities, different voices to get some of those stories out there. We don't tell enough, you know, stories. For instance, in the pandemic, we know that racialized

lower income neighborhoods in the Greater Toronto Area were much harder hit than a high income pockets of the city. But you know, sometimes the journalists were not always telling those stories, or not representing those communities enough.

So the same thing goes, I think, with any story that we're telling, find a diverse array of voices to shine a light in those areas. And that's where, you know, stakeholders and organizations can come in to to find those people who have those really compelling stories to tell.

Katharine: Yeah, it's such a great point. And it is, I think you're right, so important to make sure that we're hearing from, you know, Canadians, from all different parts of the country and walks of life so that we're really representing the country and looking at what's actually going on. And I think you're right, you know, the patient experience where I work in the Yukon is going to be very different than the patient experience in downtown Toronto, and all those children and families, I think, have stories to tell. Absolutely.

So we know that you are an award winning national health reporter at the Globe and Mail and because of that have this really in depth knowledge about the health care system? So I'd be curious to know from you, from your perspective, how do we continue to prompt that larger national conversation about how we rethink and reprioritize investments in children's health?

Carly: Yeah, this is a tricky one. And it's one that, you know, we often confront on a day to day basis, because, you know, we, as journalists kind of tend to chase the latest news, the latest scandal, the latest thing that's happening, and it's funny how quickly, you know, COVID, for a long time was, you know, every story in every paper. And now, it's, you know, something that we don't write about with the same frequency. So, you know, by same extension, when the crisis disappears, that, you know, media can move on. And so I think that, you know, it's incumbent upon, you know, people like myself to continue to ask some of those questions and check in.

So it's been a few months, what's going on now, at children's hospitals. And I think that by same extension, you know, you'd mentioned social media earlier, and, you know, for all of the damage that social media does, and it and it does do a lot of damage in terms of harassment and abuse, facing, you know, health professionals and things like that, I think that there's, there's this real power in giving people at home the ability to share their story, you know, and to kind of expose what's going on with their lives.

I mean, I actually I mentioned the yellow pages earlier. And I wonder what would have happened if I as a child, was trying to use the internet to try and find a publisher for my little fledgling children's book. So by someone giving someone a phone and an internet connection with, you know, in their child is struggling to get an appointment, they can't get access, because they live in a remote rural community. Now, all of a sudden, they're connected to, you

know, the rest of Canada, the rest of the world. So I guess that's, it's a bit of a long winded answer.

But it really is, I think, trying to continue to, to find those stories, and to do that hard work. And this is a call on, you know, myself and others who are in this field, as well as those who are working children's health, to continue to try and, you know, say that's, that's a terrible story. People need to know about this, because we need to make change happen. We've been focused so much in recent months on, you know, the new funding agreement for health across the country, in that there was \$2 billion, which is a lot but you know, in terms of the overall funding, it's actually not that much it for just for to help children's hospitals get through this current, difficult period. But I think that overall, you know, we've really started to move on.

And I think that there's, you know, from a media perspective, likely a missed opportunity there something that we can go back and do more work on. But just again, that that reminder to people who work in this space that, you know, we as journalists are only sort of as knowledgeable as, as some people who are working inside organizations help us to be so people that know what's going on and want to, you know, right or wrong, or shared injustice, I think that, yeah, come and find me, because that's what we're in the business of doing.

Katharine: No, absolutely. And I think it's so true, you know, the accountability as you sat around these recent announcements, and is that are those dollars actually going to reach children and children's health care? You know, knowing that right now, there isn't really a mechanism to ensure that happens, like you said, you know, journalists, that the media are important, I think to be asking those questions. Are these children's spaces, seeing those investments is that dollars flowing to these children's hospitals? We need to be sure that that's what's happening because we know so often we hear about these things and they don't actually come to come to be so it's great to know that there's people out there asking those questions, holding people to account. And I also really love your point about social media and how it's giving the average person a voice and ability to tell their stories and for journalists to connect with people, maybe they wouldn't have otherwise, because you meet these people online.

Carly: So I think it's a really interesting time from that perspective. Yeah. So you know, you and I have done interviews together before around the intersection of misinformation and health. And I know, it's something that you're really interested in. And again, I, I think during COVID, we saw our journalists in Canada, I would say, I think do really an excellent job in unpacking misinformation from high quality information for the public.

Katharine: Can you talk to us a little bit about right now, where you see that intersection of misinformation and health and why it's so important to have for us to be addressing it?

Carly: I think that, you know, it's such an important topic is one of the biggest ones that we're facing right now. I mean, and there's so many different, you know, crises that we're facing, is it is challenging for a lot of people right now to even read the news, because there's a lot of bad news out there. But I think when I talk about the problems of missing disinformation, you know, we basically right now in the area of the province I live in, there's, you know, whooping cough outbreaks that are occurring, you know, in huge numbers bigger than they've seen in many years. You know, chickenpox outbreaks. I remember speaking to a hospital executive about a year ago, the first chickenpox outbreak they'd seen in more than a decade. I mean, misinformation and disinformation is leading people to question the safety and efficacy of all vaccines, and it's kind of spilled over from COVID vaccines to questioning all childhood vaccines.

I did a story recently that showed that the rates of certain vaccinations given in schools have plummeted. And even with catch up programs designed to target those kids after sort of schools reopened, they're still much lower than they previously were. So we don't need to look very far to see the very real damage that misinformation can cause you, in addition to the fact that healthcare professionals, journalists, politicians, the Governor General, face an onslaught of abuse and harassment, and really just terrible comments and even threats, sometimes on a daily basis. I think that there's a number of different pressure points here, you know, so it's, it's whether it's, you know, from a harassment side of things, or from the erosion of trust in our institutions, I think that there's really so many different problems to unpack here. And one of the main issues is that I don't feel that as a country, we've put enough of a priority on meeting this problem.

I think that sometimes during COVID, we can the communications was often seen as an afterthought from some of our public health officials are really good, solid communication about why are we changing our recommendation on masks? Why are we changing your recommendation on when to get a booster. And I think that all of these changes without proper and really robust, transparent communications, it's all contributing to what we've seen, which is this erosion of trust. And then you have people who are actually capitalizing on this to say, look, you see, our public health institutions and experts and leaders cannot be trusted, they're lying to you. And all of a sudden, some of that those falsehoods start to really trickle down and get in the public consciousness. And then we have, you know, whooping cough outbreaks and measles outbreaks, I'm sure won't be too far behind. So I think that, you know, the stakes are really high. And we don't do we haven't done enough yet. Nowhere in the country, or the world has really figured out how to tackle this problem.

You know, whether it's regulating social media, which is highly controversial, or simply getting better at science literacy, no one has all of the answers, but I think that we need to do more. There's some work underway in in in Canada, but I think, you know, we need to see our governments and our leaders take on this problem in a bigger way.

Katharine: Yeah, I absolutely agree with you. And I think it's true, you know, the, the threat of misinformation has those very practical outcomes, like you're talking about, you know, that vaccine hesitancy increasing people not having their children vaccinated and these disease outbreaks. But then I think we also are seeing the rise of misinformation and what comes from that starting to even undermine our other institutions, democracy itself, even you could argue. So I think the role of misinformation in our society broadly as a huge threat to many things should not be underestimated, and as you said, is a challenging space to tackle for so many reasons.

But I think it's going to be an ongoing threat to health. And I think all of us need to be partnering to think about how do we combat that and make sure that Canadians are safe, that our democratic, democratic institutions are functional, and that we can kind of continue to move forward so I share that concern. I think it's a fascinating time to be watching how this is evolving. You know, so we obviously you know, know this is a big issue. What role do you think organizations like Children's Healthcare Canada can play in identifying and responding to misinformation and informing Canadians across the country really on the dangers of health misinformation?

Carly: Yeah, I think that you know, you guys and others have done a pretty remarkable job trying to be open and transparent about issues like vaccines that have become so contentious in recent years, even more. So since COVID. I think there has been a lot of efforts to reach people to answer their questions. And I think that those kinds of efforts, just continuing to amplify those and do more of them is part of the key here. I mean, the vast majority of Canadians, you know, understand good science, they understand, you know, how to, you know, you know, the importance of these kinds of public health initiatives,

I think there's, you know a small bit sizeable segment of people who are, who are having some of those questions, some people are literally wanting just have their questions answered, and there's some people who are outright going to reject public health interventions. You know, that's their prerogative, but I think it's some of those people who are asking questions that we need to reach most urgently. So you know, not everyone is, is reading the newspaper anymore, not everyone is turning on the TV to see what the newscasters are saying, some of them are simply going to social media to get information. And, you know, I think that's one of the main areas of concern that if people are, you know, tuning out mainstream, credible, legitimate organizations, and tuning into, you know, influencers and, you know, wellness people, and you name it, there's so many different people, spreading false messages on social

media, they're making a ton of money for doing so, which is not something we focus on enough.

But you know, people who are spreading misinformation are getting really wealthy off of, you know, selling their wares to unsuspecting people. I think that's where some of the work can be done, more of that work can be done, you know, targeting people on social media use, like, I often will say, when I'm asked about this, that the people who are, you know, spreading misinformation, the true anti vaxxers, a lot of them spend their entire days and nights thinking about how to make their post go viral. And they're not afraid to, I mean, like, say whatever they want, they can lie with abandon.

And so I think that, you know, it's much more difficult to spread a really credible but reasoned, scientific based message that sometimes we don't have all the answers and vaccines aren't 100% effective in every instance. And nor were they sort of designed to, it's more difficult to communicate that in, you know, in an Instagram reel. But I think that's part of the challenge is really trying to leverage some of these tools like Tiktok, and Instagram, where people are, and with our shortened attention spans, especially as younger people are continuing to use those platforms and not others, to try and capitalize on using them to make good information go viral.

Katharine: So true, I so agree with you. And I think that's absolutely right. You know, when you're presenting something as black and white, it's so easy to make it compelling. And when you're trying to actually provide accurate misinformation. And as you said, it's, you know, health medicine, the interventions, we offer people there, they're never all yes, or, you know, all good or all bad or 100%, safe and, and trying to convey that subtleties to people and haven't informed conversations in this current world where everything's kind of a soundbite. It is really challenging. But I absolutely agree with you, I think we need to be in those spaces. We need to be putting good information out there.

And I think organizations like Children's Healthcare Canada, putting their name and their brand out there to parents is really important so that they can know, hey, this is a reliable place to hear from actual experts who care for children about how to make decisions for my family. So I totally agree, if we're not in those spaces, they're just going to continue to be overwhelmed by other people who don't hold themselves to those same standards.

So Carly, I want to thank you so much for your time today, sharing your story, your personal story, your journey in journalism, and just as insights from the incredible work that you do every day. It's been a real pleasure for me, having met you now several times to get to have this time together and get to know you a little bit better. So thank you so much.

Carly: It's been such a pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

Katharine: So to all our listeners, stay safe and be well. To stay up to date on all our spark offerings, including upcoming podcast episodes, visit our website at Children's Healthcare canada.ca And subscribe to our spark news bi weekly bulletin if you haven't already. Thank you for listening to Spark Conversations. And before we go show some love for your new podcast series by leaving us a review and then join us again next month. Thanks everyone.