Letter from Fiona Fox

Welcome to the first issue of the Science Media Centre’s newsletter. I think I am right in saying that the SMC is unique in being a PR operation unencumbered with promoting its brand name. But as liberating as this is, it also means that many of you will not readily identify our role in the science stories that have recently been in the headlines. So the sole objective of this newsletter is to let you know what we have done and what we plan to do.

In just six months the SMC has successfully established itself as a reliable source for journalists, facilitated events praised for building bridges between scientists and journalists and shown that it is not only politicians and NGOs who can set the media agenda – all of which are detailed over the next few pages.

The SMC began life as a grand vision formulated by Baroness Greenfield and a prestigious Advisory Council. Transforming this into a reality demanded a clear focus and one that would be bought into by our key stakeholders. So we embarked on an intensive consultation exercise, talking to nearly 300 people, which is summarised in a comprehensive report available from the Centre.

One of the clearest things to emerge from this was the need for the SMC to concentrate its efforts on science in the headlines. Scientists, science press officers and journalists all agree that while scientists are getting better at talking about their research to specialist journals and correspondents, many continue to see science in the headlines as a threat rather than an opportunity. Whether it’s GM, MMR or cloning most scientists would still rather be anywhere else than in the studio with John Humphrys or Jeremy Paxman. So while the Centre’s activities are varied and wide-ranging, they always have this focus in mind. Meanwhile, our philosophy relies on getting the media to ‘do’ science better by getting scientists to ‘do’ the media better.

The great thing about running a new initiative is that we are open, enthusiastic and excited by new ideas, so please lobby us, criticise us or praise us. We hope you enjoy this rapid run through of what we are doing and planning and we look forward to hearing from you.

Fiona Fox
Head of the Science Media Centre
Where science meets the headlines

With our strapline, Where Science Meets the Headlines, it is hardly surprising that when a science story looms large over the news agenda the SMC really springs into action.

Since opening in April, we have been dealing with a host of headline grabbing stories: from MMR controversies to stem cell discoveries, from human cloning claims to Mexican maize disputes. When science hits the headlines you will find us responding to media enquiries, talking to scientists, setting up interviews and placing articles. However, we are usually hard at work before the story has broken, getting advance information from the many scientists and science press offices we know. Once we have identified a newsworthy story we canvass the scientific community for reaction, and get these quotes to newsdesks as swiftly as possible – we call these our ‘round up’ press releases.

These collated comments are featuring prominently in newspaper articles, and the broadcast media are using them to select potential interviewees. For example, we issued two round up press releases on Blair’s ‘Science Matters’ speech, resulting in interviews for ITN, 5 Live, Newsnight, Channel 5 News, The World Tonight and BBC News 24, and quotes in The Guardian, Financial Times and BBC Online.

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At its height, the MMR media furore was as intense as the BSE or ‘Frankenfoods’ crises. Although a handful of doctors have suggested links between MMR and bowel disorders and autism, the vast weight of scientific opinion says the connection is unproven. Yet the public remains unconvinced.

Media coverage clearly affected attitudes to MMR. We therefore decided to bring together the journalists and scientists who had lived and breathed the controversy to discuss which communication strategies worked and which fuelled the debate. The 50 attendees included representatives from the Department of Health, the MRC, the PHLS, London hospitals, patient’s groups and the media.

We questioned how well the scientific community had coped with media interest around MMR and considered whether scientists are powerless before a news media that loves the minority view. We also analysed the media’s role in the affair and examined why certain angles were covered over others.

It was generally agreed that the media can heavily influence parents and health workers, placing an onus on journalists to report responsibly. It also means that if scientists want to communicate effectively with the public, they must first communicate effectively with the media.

For a full copy of the report, go to: http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/aboutus/MMRreport.html

‘It was a lifeline discovering that this service existed.’ Richard and Judy

for helping me with this! Thank you so much’ BBC Manchester

Centre scores again!’ You and Yours

‘This is a fantastic service, just great for people like us’ BBC4

an amazing service – I’ll certainly be using it again’ Maverick TV
Housed in the Royal Institution, the SMC has a beautiful central London venue that is available free of charge for anyone looking to host an event connected to science and the media. The SMC is equipped with an ISDN line, PowerPoint and Internet access and has a capacity for around 40 people, making it the perfect place for small press conferences, interviews, briefings, launches, media training etc.

So if you need a free venue to hold your science-media event, please call the SMC on 020 7670 2980.

What next for the SMC?

In addition to dealing with science in the headlines, here is a taster of some of our activities over the coming months:

- **Genetics Meeting** An informal discussion with our genetics contacts about the key themes, events and research that will project genetics onto the news agenda.
- **Introduction to the Media** Media training with a difference; an introduction for scientists to how the news media works.
- **OST workshop** The SMC is hosting a government science communication workshop.
- **Communicating Animal Research** A brainstorming session with 10 expert communicators to discuss strategies for communication about animal research. The results of this meeting will be published in a best practice guide.
- **Horizon Scanning** Prof Adam Finn and Dr David Elliman on multiple vaccines.
- **Crop Trials Meeting** A meeting with our GM contacts to consider the impending media coverage of the crop trials’ results.
- **Biodiversity Briefing** A briefing for journalists about biodiversity with Lord May and Professor John Lawton.
- **ABSW Briefings** We continue to work with the ABSW on their monthly science briefings for science writers.

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