



Science Media Centre

where science meets the headlines

issue 2

summer 2003

the science media centre: one year on

This newsletter comes to you just after the Science Media Centre has celebrated its first birthday. Rather like other new developments in science, the centre's opening in April 2002 was greeted with a mixture of exaggerated claims and open scepticism. One year on, almost everyone who regularly uses the SMC agrees that it is making a significant and positive contribution to science media relations.

The goal of establishing a centre to act as a reliable port of call for journalists covering a major science story was always ambitious, especially considering that it was a centre with no scientists or research of its own. From the outset it was clear that the SMC could not succeed without establishing strong relationships with scientists, press officers and the media, and this became our main priority over the first few months.

A testament to our success in forging these relationships is that we can now boast of having over 500 of the country's most media friendly scientists as contacts, as well as over 200 science press officers. This huge, valuable network puts us in a position to provide journalists with what they need, in the time frame they need it, especially when science hits the headlines.

While this newsletter will take you on a whistle-stop tour of the variety of activities developed for scientists and journalists, one area to highlight is our regular media briefings which have shown that the SMC can also generate some headlines of its own. From biological terrorism and multiple vaccines to IVF mix-ups and biodiversity, we now have a file packed with press cuttings which add some evidence-based information to the wider public debates around these issues. Given the reputation these briefings have already gained within the national media, they provide an important forum for scientists to get their messages across on controversial issues in science.

Over the first year the centre has also worked with its Board to clarify and refine its basic values. Before the centre opened there was some speculation as to whether it was setting out to silence the growing criticism of science or to don the boxing gloves and do battle for science. In the event neither is the case. Our goal is to ensure that when science stories hit the headlines, journalists, and ultimately the public, have access to accurate, evidence-based information. Given the often fraught relationship between scientists and journalists documented in the House of Lords report that spawned the SMC, our job is to build bridges between the two and make sure that the messages of scientists are heard when science tops the news agenda.

As part of the SMC's one-year review, we asked scientists, press officers and journalists what they thought of the show so far. Of the 100 or so written responses, some of which are quoted in this newsletter, the centre's first year gets a huge thumbs up. One year ago, the staff and board of the SMC set out, with some trepidation, to set up a new, unique service that would meet the needs of both scientists and journalists. As you glance over the next few pages, we hope that you can see some of the ways that we have begun to achieve this goal.

What they have said about us...

'The HFEA thinks you're an absolutely superb organisation and looks forward to lots of work with you in the next year!'

Anne Furedi, Head of Communications, HFEA

'I can't tell you how many times I've come into the office and discovered that you have already sent an email with a great list of experts for us to contact. You couldn't ask for a politer, more hard working team.'

Linda Gummerly, Health and Science producer, ITN

'The small brochures that give instruction about communicating (i.e. genetics terminology, animal research) have been very valuable.

Do keep these coming!'

Prof Terrie Moffitt, Institute of Psychiatry, Kings College London

'As a correspondent new to the science brief, I've found the SMC unfailingly helpful and enthusiastic and I really wish that in previous jobs I'd found similar support. The Centre's staff offer just the right mix of responsiveness to breaking news and of foresight into upcoming stories.'

David Shukman, Science Correspondent, BBC

working with the media

From cult cloning claims and the space shuttle disaster, to the demise of Dolly: science certainly hasn't been shying away from the news in the last six months. Our role when science dominates the news agenda is to pass as much information to the journalists covering the story, as quickly as possible. Whether this is sending out gathered reaction or simply a list of relevant scientists available to comment – we strive to get the right information to the right journalists in the right time. Below are just a handful of the many news stories that we have been working on since the last newsletter:

As a company announced that they were one step closer to genetically engineering pigs for **xenotransplantations** (animal to human organ transplants), we collated nine comments from various scientists and ethicists for the media.

Following the **oil tanker disaster** in Spain, we found environment and oil clean-up experts who could comment.

When **ricin** was discovered in a flat in Wood Green, we passed experts' names to the media along with 10 important facts about ricin.

Within hours of the **Columbia space shuttle** disaster, and working closely with press officers, we found scientists available to give comment and phoned every national newsdesk with this information.

Scientists' reactions to the **death of Dolly** were sent straight to the media, within hours of hearing the news.

As the numbers of infections and deaths from the **SARS virus** grew, we provided respiratory experts, virologists and epidemiologists for the media.

Even when science isn't all over the front pages our service of putting journalists in touch with scientists continues. Some examples? Helping the Sun to find someone who could explain why all bananas are clones, working with Any Questions to find potential science panellists, and setting up two hours worth of local radio interviews on chemical terrorism for the BBC's General News Service, to name but a few.



genetics in a nutshell

You are a news journalist, a story about gene therapy lands on your desk, it's going to be big news – but what the heck's a vector, how do you even describe what a gene is and where can you find this out? Don't worry, help is at hand in the shape of our new guide for newsdesks: *Genetics in a Nutshell*. This guide, the first in a series, came about through pleas from both the scientific community and the media. Scientists were complaining that journalists were often getting scientific terms wrong; journalists were complaining because they had no ready-to-hand source for this kind of information. The result? A series of guides produced by the SMC, with a glossary of scientific terms translated into journalese, backgrounders to some of the more contentious issues, and a list of 'must have' contacts. The genetics guide has been thoroughly checked by both scientists (Prof Steve Jones, Prof Robin Lovell-Badge, and Dr Matt Ridley) to retain its scientific accuracy, and the media (local newspaper editors, the head of BBC news gathering, the Sun etc) to ensure that the information is useful and usable. It is not something that news journalists have to sit, read and learn but something that they can grab the next time that they suddenly find they are covering a story about cloning or RNAi. This guide will be offered to every newsdesk in the country, and we have plans to add to the series shortly.



war and science

With the approach and onset of the conflict in Iraq, the SMC went on a war footing, working with press officers to create a comprehensive list of experts on war-related science issues. Chemical and biological warfare and terrorism, post-traumatic stress disorder, burning oil fields, depleted uranium and weapon technology were all areas likely to be playing a part in the news coverage over the coming months. The media's blanket coverage of this war meant that many general reporters were covering science angles with little knowledge of where to go for the right specialists. Our list of contacts went out to every major newsdesk, as well as every national science, health, environment and defence correspondent, and ensured that journalists had easy access to the right scientists and to accurate information.

As well as reactive work, the centre also generated some headlines from press briefings on war-related issues. The media coverage of the real threat of chemical warfare in Iraq that emerged from our briefing was rather different to much that preceded it. And other briefings on the psychology of war and the environmental impact of burning oil fields were well covered in the press.

'I am pleased with the way SMC has developed over the year. They have worked sensitively and carefully to ensure that the science organisations in the UK are brought in to contribute to news briefings.'

Sheila Anderson, Head of Communications, NERC

'[On being a contact for the space shuttle disaster] I have found it very useful and effective in allowing me to provide the right kind of information for the needs of the media.'

Prof Martin Barstow, Dept of Physics and Astronomy, University of Leicester

'The round-up press releases are excellent. One of those services you wonder how you lived without, before it was there!'

Mark Henderson, Science Correspondent, The Times

'The briefings, in particular, have been extremely useful and sometimes have set the agenda.'

Geraint Smith, Science Correspondent, Evening Standard

'You obviously have a great understanding of what our needs are, and the deadline pressures.'

Andy Joynson, BBC North

when scientists meet the media



briefings

After just one year in operation, we can now point to a wide variety of positive science stories generated entirely by the centre.

These stories have emerged from our media briefings – an area of work that has flourished throughout our first year. At the most basic level these allow us to facilitate scientists to talk to the media when science hits the headlines. However, they also fit well with the centre's brief on a number of levels: helping us to provide the media with access to accurate, evidence-based information about controversial subjects; enabling scientists to be more proactive about issues likely to arouse public concern; and helping journalists to scan the horizon and get background information and new contacts on stories that they will be covering in the coming months.

The media coverage resulting from the briefings is evidence of the centre's potential to make a difference. Despite the powerful legacy of fear left by the MMR controversy, the message that combined vaccines do not damage a child's immune system made its way from our press briefing into all sections of the national media. The centre's decision to hold a briefing about IVF mix-ups on the day the most infamous case of this returned to the High Court meant that the scares were balanced by the reassurances from the scientific community. And despite the build-up to war, various newspapers carried the story that some of the country's leading experts on biological and chemical terrorism believed that the threat from agents like ricin and smallpox had been exaggerated.

Having initially planned to hold one briefing a month, the centre now has on average one a week. All are well attended by the national media and despite usually being offered as backgrounders, most have resulted in positive media coverage. When the centre solicited the media's reaction to our first year's activities, the briefings won a huge vote of confidence with over 20 journalists from the national media saying that they were of consistently high quality and a useful source of background and good stories.

The subjects for these briefings emerge from the ongoing dialogue that the centre's staff have with scientists, press officers and journalists.

One of the advantages of our independence is our ability to bring scientists from different scientific institutions onto the same platform. For example, our briefing on the science behind waste brought together four scientists funded by three different research councils; our briefing on the Hashmi case saw the family sharing a platform with the HFEA, the BMA and an IVF specialist from Nottingham.

The briefings fall into three categories:

Horizon Scanning

Beating the superbugs

Dr Armine Sefton and Prof John Oxford

The future of neuroscience

Baroness Greenfield

Biodiversity Prof John Lawton and Lord May

Getting Britain's railways back on track

Sir David Davies and Prof Rod Smith

Waste: the good, the bad and the ugly

Prof Roland Clift, Prof William Powrie, Sir Geoffrey Allen and Prof Bob Lee

Nanotechnology

Prof Mark Welland and Prof John Ryan

DNA 60: the future of genetic medicine

Dr Allen Roses and Prof David Goldstein

News-Related Backgrounders

Multiple vaccines

Prof Adam Finn and Dr David Elliman

The science of GM

Dr Gordon Conway, Prof Chris Lamb, Dr Julian Ma and Prof Julia Goodfellow

Biological and chemical terrorism

Prof John Oxford, Prof Brian Duerden, Dr Steve Emmett and Prof Tom Inch

Psychology of war Prof Simon Wessely,

Prof Chris Brewin and Dr Neil Greenberg

Chemical and biological warfare

Prof Alistair Hay, Dr Julian Perry-Robinson and Prof Brian Spratt

The environmental and health impact of burning oil fields

David Salt, Prof James Readman, Prof Ian Colbeck

The UK transplant crisis

Dr Peter Rowe, Dr Jane Griffiths and Dr Keith Rigg

News Briefings

IVF mix-ups Prof Simon Fishel, Suzi Leather, Maureen Dalziel and Dr Sue Avery

Launch of the Greenfield report

Baroness Greenfield, Dr Nancy Lane, Dr Gill Samuels and Dr Jan Peters

Launch of Broom's Barn research on

environmental impact of GM Dr John Pidgeon, Dr Alan Dewar and Dr Mike May

Hashmi Briefing

Hashmi family, Prof Simon Fishel, Dr Vivienne Nathanson and Suzi Leather

'The SMC? Accessible, useful, efficient, friendly, swift and canny.'

Sara Abdulla, Editor, Nature Online

'The SMC is friendly, accessible and performs a vital role in helping break down the barriers between research scientists and the media.'

Patrick Wilson, Press and Publicity Officer, University of East London



This newsletter was edited by Becky Morelle, for any feedback or information please email bmorelle@ri.ac.uk

working with scientists

science in a soundbite

Here at the SMC we encourage scientists to embrace the media when science is in the headlines, and we would urge them to see every interview as an opportunity rather than a threat. And that's not just an opportunity to talk about a particular piece of research, but a chance to explain a bit more about how science works.

With this in mind, we have been producing a series of short guides for scientists, doctors and engineers, providing effective ways of explaining different aspects of the scientific process within the context of a short news interview. The series is called *Communicating Science in the News*, and the content of each guide has been compiled from meetings with top scientists and journalists who brainstormed the best ways of talking about the different issues that each leaflet covers.

While our first, extremely popular, leaflet *Communicating Risk* attempted to furnish harried scientists with options of how to answer the perennial poser, "Is this safe?", our next leaflet addresses the question, "Do you trust this research?" Many scientists refer to peer review in this situation, yet the public are often completely unaware of this system. *Communicating Peer Review*, currently in production, gives scientists a range of short ways that describe what peer review is, how it works, and why it is an important tool to science.



animal research in the news

Animal research is an integral part of many new advances in medicine, and it is important that scientists involved can explain how and why it is used, especially within the context of a media interview. Yet many are worried about what questions they will face, and what reaction their answers will prompt. *When Animal Research Hits the Headlines* is a guide for scientists and doctors that looks at effective ways of responding to some of the most commonly asked questions in a media interview that may feature animal research. It was compiled with advice from scientists who are experienced in doing these interviews, along with the Association of Medical Research Charities and the Research Defence Society. This guide was introduced to over 80 press officers and scientists at a half-day conference, run in collaboration with the new Coalition for Medical Progress. The conference featured advice from scientists and press officers experienced in talking to the media about animal research, and a mock press conference, with journalists on hand from the Today programme and ITN news to discuss the effectiveness of the panel's answers.

where do our scientists come from?

The successes of the SMC's first year are largely due to the enthusiasm and expertise of the scientists that we call on when science is in the headlines. So we still spend a lot of time talent spotting for those scientists who are both experts in their field and capable communicators who are willing to speak to the media at a moment's notice. There are now more than 500 scientists on our database, who were recruited in a variety of different ways. We may have heard them give a fantastic lecture or radio interview, explaining complex issues in layman's terms. But often, our contact comes via a recommendation from a press officer or scientific colleague.

While some media enquiries go straight to these scientists, it is often better to direct a journalist to the press office of a particular university or scientific institution. That's why the 220 press officers on our database are so important to us. Many also see the SMC as an opportunity of increasing the exposure of their institution. We are in the luxurious position of not having to worry about getting our name mentioned in media reports – even if we do set up an interview the plug is always for the institution that the scientist belongs to.

So let us offer a big thank you to scientists and press officers for all of your help so far.

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Science Media Centre

21 Albemarle Street
London W1S 4BS

telephone
020 7670 2980

fax
020 7670 2950

email
bmorelle@ri.ac.uk

web
www.ScienceMediaCentre.org