



## What is the Science Media Centre?

The Science Media Centre is an independent press office for science, providing the national news media with access to the best science when stories hit the headlines. Opened in April 2002 and now housed in the Wellcome Trust, the Centre believes that scientists can have a huge impact on the way the media cover science, by engaging more often, more quickly and more effectively with the stories that are influencing public debate and attitudes to science. The SMC works to ensure that journalists in the national news media have access to accurate, evidence-based and peer-reviewed scientific information in the rapid timeframe they require.

The SMC is completely independent of any one organisation and has a wide range of funders including media groups, scientific institutions, charities, universities and science-based companies. To preserve its independence there is an upper limit on donations, which is set at 5% of the annual running costs.

## Some facts about the SMC

- Every single national news media outlet makes extensive use of the SMC's services.
- The Centre ran 80 press briefings from April 2012 to March 2013– approximately 92% of which resulted in media coverage – with an average of 9 national news journalist attending and 10 articles and interviews resulting from each briefing.
- From April 2012 to March 2013, the SMC provided 265 Roundups and Rapid Reactions to breaking news stories.
- From April 2012 to March 2013, the SMC responded to 557 media enquiries: 46% from broadcast outlets (30% BBC), 46% from national newspapers, and 8% from other media.
- The SMC has over 2500 experts and 1200 science press officers on its database, all of whom have signed up to engage with the news media when their issue hits the headlines.
- As a result of its extensive network of scientists and press officers, from April 2012 to March 2013 the SMC was able to deal with 88% of the media enquiries it received.
- The SMC is the only press office in the UK that is not required to promote its brand name or any institutional line, making it completely independent and extremely popular with journalists.
- As part of a growing network of international SMCs, the Centre is increasingly working with the global news media and having an impact around the world.

## What we actually do

The main services that the Centre provides to journalists are:

### ***Rapid Reaction***

When a story breaks the SMC springs into action – persuading the leading experts that they have to drop what they're doing to engage with the story and then contacting journalists at all the major news outlets to offer those experts for interviews or immediate comment. Our rapid reaction service is a real example of a win-win scenario for science and the media: the frantic news journalists are delighted to get experts to fill

their slots, and the SMC ensures that the public is hearing the best science rather than self-appointed experts who may have less respect for evidence.

*"I just wanted to say thank you for putting me in touch with a scientist earlier. I know it was a really busy day for you and speaking to him really got me out of a tight spot." Fiona MacRae, Daily Mail*

## **Rounding Up Reaction**

This is a service that's totally unique to the SMC. We gather reactions from leading experts to tomorrow's science stories and provide them to journalists for inclusion in their articles. Quotes from independent scientists can help reporters identify the strengths and weaknesses of a new study, and put it into the context of the wider body of research. Print journalists are free to use the quotes in their articles, while broadcast media use them to identify which scientists are available for interviews and how the scientific community is reacting.

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

## **Briefings**

The Science Media Centre runs regular press briefings for UK news journalists. These address a wide range of topical issues where experts feel that accurate, evidence-based information has been missing from the media and public debate. Our briefings have proved to be instrumental for scientifically-accurate media coverage of certain issues. As well as News briefings where a new study or finding is announced, we also run emergency briefings in the wake of very controversial breaking news stories, and regular Background briefings to explore a complex or controversial scientific subject. Recent examples have been Schmallenberg, Ash Dieback, Badger culling, horsemeat, DSM5, H7N9, GM animals and sea level rise.

The Centre is also popular as a neutral venue for scientific institutions who want to speak out on issues of joint concern, such as NHS reform and the science budget.

## **Other Services**

**Before the Headlines** is a service for journalists where we provide brief, independent statistical analysis of scientific papers with accompanying critique of the authors' own conclusions, at a glance. They are structured in a simple format, with clear summaries of what the paper in question claims, and a concise assessment of the strengths and limitations. This service is provided to the SMC by volunteer statisticians.

The Centre produces a set of widely circulated **Science in a Soundbite** crib sheets for scientists preparing to do interviews where they have an opportunity to say something about the way science works – including **Top Tips** for working with the media, risk communication, peer review, uncertainty and animal research. These are available to download at: [www.sciencemediacentre.org/pages/publications/](http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/pages/publications/)

In addition, the SMC runs hugely popular **Introduction to the News Media** sessions for scientists, giving a broad overview of why they should engage with the media. We also run regular 'brain storm' sessions for scientists to discuss the media coverage of controversial issues.

The Centre also produces **Briefing Notes**, which are written for broadcasters and non-specialists, giving a rapidly digestible summary of controversial topics in science and health.

## ***What they say about us***

**Professor Ken Donaldson, respiratory toxicologist, University of Edinburgh, said:**

"In-depth interaction with journalists allowed us to record the caveats of our work and this resulted in remarkably balanced reportage for what could easily have been the scare story of the year. It's hard to imagine the science news landscape in the UK without the SMC."

**Jeremy Laurance, Health Editor, The Independent, said:**

"It is not your contacts that impress - or not only - but your ability to get responses out of them in short order. Brilliant."

**Richard Flynn, Communications Manager, Radioactive Waste Management Directorate, said:**

"I would like to say a huge thank you to you and the team for your sterling work yesterday. Everything was perfect and we are looking at and listening to the coverage generated. We can see the huge benefits of using the SMC services and again would THANK YOU for your professionalism and input into making this what we see as a very successful event."

**Sarah Boseley, Health Editor, The Guardian, said:**

"We all think the SMC is wonderful and science journalism would be a poorer thing without it!"

*Genetically Modified Chickens to Prevent the Spread of Avian Flu*

**Laurence Tiley, expert in molecular virology, University of Cambridge, said:**

"Thanks for this and all your other help. It was very reassuring to have people as experienced and professional as those of you at the SMC to help us steer these tricky waters. Your experience in managing controversial areas within science gave us the confidence to publicise our research findings and contribute to the public debate."

**Lawrence McGinty, Science and Medical Editor, ITV News, said:**

"You know that feeling of 'how did we ever do without them'? People often say that about mobile phone but it's also true of the Science Media Centre. Just indispensable. Essential."

**Emma Little, Health and Science Editor, The Sun, said:**

"What an incredible team. With a lot of hard work, the SMC has built a bridge between the scientific community and journalists. It is a gateway to informed opinion on the stories that matter. Their rapid response service is first-class."

For more information please visit our website [www.sciencemediacentre.org](http://www.sciencemediacentre.org)

The Science Media Centre is an independent venture working to promote the voices, stories and views from the scientific community to the news media when science is in the headlines. Over 80 supporters including scientific institutions, media groups, charities, universities, corporate organisations and individuals fund the Centre, with donations capped at 5% of the running costs to preserve its independence.

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