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Organisation: Faculty of Public Health

Is this input submitted as an organisational or individual response? Individual

Are you happy for your response to be published by the Academy? Yes

Roles and responsibilities

1. What can scientists do to ensure their work is communicated accurately when working with you on press-released research?

2. What is the role of journalists in communicating the benefits or harms of medicines, and how much responsibility should they take? How does the pace of journalism affect this?

3. What is the role of press officers in communicating science to the public via the media, and how much responsibility should they take for accuracy of articles that originate from press-released research?

Our role is to act as a bridge between the science and the journalist and make sure that evidence is conveyed in an accurate and news-friendly way. The two are not mutually exclusive: in my experience researchers may be nervous of the media because they worry the data won't be accurately reported. However, the onus is on them to work with their press colleagues to simplify the data enough that a lay person can understand it. The 'Chip and Dan' book Making it Stick has a nice analogy on this, which you may be familiar with, which compares the expert with someone tapping out the beat of a song and expecting someone else to know what the song is.

Perhaps more junior and/or nervous scientists need to work with their peers or mentors who have found ways to successfully communicate science to the public.

4. How much responsibility should journalists take for accuracy of articles that originate from press-released research?

5. Are you supported in your efforts to communicate the context of evidence – are appropriate guidelines available?

6. What responsibility do journalists have to the public/patients who might base health decisions on how the media present evidence? What do you see as a journalist's responsibility when it comes to balancing the health needs of the individual verses those of the population?

Evaluating and reporting evidence

7. Are press releases clear enough about:

- whether something is an association or a causative relationship?
- whether a study is, for example, an observational study or a randomised control trial?
- whether the main result being reported was the finding related to the original hypothesis or an incidental finding?

8. If a press release emphasises limitations and caveats, are you more likely to also emphasise them in your articles?

9. Do you treat observational and epidemiological studies differently than randomised controlled trials?

10. Do you think preliminary research (e.g. work in cells, before animal or human trials) should always be publicised (e.g. via press release) by journals or institutions, and how likely are you to cover preliminary work?

11. Do you treat unpublished science being presented at conferences differently than science published in a peer-reviewed journal?

12. Do you treat opinion pieces and editorials published in journals differently than original research with new data that's published in the same journals?

Yes

The process of communicating evidence

13. What do you think are the challenges of communicating evidence through the research → press release → media process? What would a better system look like?

14. How much do the public understand about the way science works (the process of research and publication; different types of studies; etc.), and does it matter if they don't? Do you think you have any role in educating the public in interpreting the quality of evidence?

15. How important do you think absolute risk is when communicating risk? If the absolute risk was not given in the press release would you try and source the relevant information?

It all has to come back to the evidence and why one scientist might interpret it differently from another, and why this is a normal part of the process of gaining further understanding of the issue at hand.

16. How do you judge someone's expertise?!

17. How much confidence do you have in the objectivity of single-issue research charities or campaign groups? And how does that compare to that of individual academics?

18. If two experts have opposing views, how do you decide how much space to give each of them?

