

Name: Kerry Noble

Job Title: News Editor, Communications and Public Affairs

Organisation: Imperial College London

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?

Allow as much time as possible to plan communications, write press releases, etc. so there is time to think about the best way to communicate and to re-draft press releases as needed until both parties are happy. Make time to talk to press officers and to journalists. Be honest about any concerns they have.

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?

Balance is the key – although a news piece is bound to focus on one aspect there should be space for some context. When the copy is written by specialist reporters, they will have all the background knowledge to be able to give the context, even when in a rush. It's a lot harder when the reporter doesn't know the field and is short on time.

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?

I feel like press officers have the biggest responsibility because they are familiar with both the science and the media. It is their job to think through how the story might play out in the media and use that knowledge to find the best way to communicate the research. If they get it right, the resulting news coverage is overwhelmingly accurate. And they are in the best position to intervene if any coverage is inaccurate.

4. What is the relative importance of accuracy and newsworthiness when working with scientists on press releases?

The two are not necessarily at odds with each other. If the research is newsworthy then accuracy will not hamper this. If it's not newsworthy then it probably isn't one for a press release. These days there are loads of other ways to communicate about research so the press release isn't the be-all and end-all.

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

Surely the fear of messing up is sufficient??

Evaluating and reporting evidence

6. What are the challenges of including sufficient clarity in press releases regarding:

- whether something is an association or a causative relationship?
- whether a study is, for example, an observational study or a randomised control trial? A bit harder as it requires more explanation.
- whether the main result being reported was the finding related to the original hypothesis or an incidental finding? It usually is related and when it's not, again it's an integral part of the story.

- Not too difficult as it's an inherent part of the story.
- I think it's easy for readers to not get why this is important.

7. What in your opinion can be the effect of emphasising limitations and caveats in press releases?

Not a problem. There is a limit to how much of this you can include but it's easy to put in the main ones. It's also easy for these to be missed out in subsequent coverage.

8. Do you think journalists treat observational studies and randomised controlled trials differently, and do you approach press releases for each differently?

Some probably do but it's just one factor in so many that there are no hard-and-fast rules about it. I don't think they warrant a completely different approach, just a decent but brief explanation.

9. How important do you think absolute risk is when communicating risk, and do you always include it in press releases?

OMG, it is so important! I learnt this very early in my career. I will do my utmost to include them. The problem is that researchers don't always include them in their papers. If there is time and it's possible, I will ask them to go away and work them out, even though some will criticise this because it means using figures that are not in the peer-reviewed paper.

10. What do you think are the benefits and risks of publicising preliminary research (e.g. work in cells, before animal or human trials)?

The main risk is raising false-hope, and this is a big one. But I still think there is an argument for doing it – you can't ignore a whole load of science (and it's probably the biggest part). Just needs to be handled with thought and care. If it's in cells in the lab, just say so. And it helps to explain how science progresses.

11. What do you think are the benefits and risks of publicising unpublished science that's being presented at conferences?

I would say treat with caution but don't avoid it completely. Risks are that the research doesn't hold up in the long term. Benefits are that it's an opportunity to talk about promising work.

12. What do you think are the benefits and risks of press releasing opinion pieces and editorials (rather than original research with new data) being published in journals?

There's probably no other field where we would worry about this. Scientists are entitled to have opinions and to share them, as long as it's clear that they are opinions. If scientists don't give their opinions then others will and the world will be a worse place.

The process of communicating evidence

13. What do you think are the challenges of communicating evidence through the research → press release → media process? Do you think there might be a better system; and if so what would it look like?

While there is scope for misinterpretation at press release and media stages, on the whole I think the press officer/press release function plays a vital role in gathering, processing, filtering and interpreting evidence so that it is suitable for a much wider audience.

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 press officers and journalists have any role in educating the public in interpreting the quality of evidence?

I think very little and there's no reason why that will change. Of course it would make the process of communicating much easier (and eliminate quite a few jobs along the way) but it's not necessary. What is probably more important is to maintain the level of public trust and interest in science by keeping media coverage of research as accurate and fascinating as possible.

15. What are the challenges of working with scientists with opposing views, and how do you navigate working with scientists that may have views that might be seen as different from those of the mainstream scientific community?

This hasn't often come up for me within one organisation. Do opposing scientists deliberately stay away from each other? I would always be cautious working with someone who had a minority view but if everything was in order (e.g. work is published in a decent journal) I would still go ahead.