

Name: Renee Watson

Job Title:

Organisation:

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?

Focus the information they give on a select number of clear messages and not expect their work to be represented in the press in the same way it would in a journal. get training in communication skills, particularly pertinent to press media. use pictures.

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?

I think the most important role of a journalist is to discern when it is appropriate to or not to seek differing points of view because seeking counter points of view is not always ethical. for example if the vast majority of a profession accepts something as fact it is not the role of the journalist to intentionally seek out an alternative view and present it as a counter argument with equal weight/validity. the pace of journalism is not aligned with the pace of scientific discovery and interrogation. nor is it aligned with the scientific method. these are the reasons i think that journalist share the moral responsibility of disasters like the vaccines and autism issue.

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?

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

Accuracy must come first. a talented journalist should be able to tease out the thing people will want to hear about and present it accurately.

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

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?

- whether the main result being reported was the finding related to the original hypothesis or an incidental finding?

People are largely uncertain about measuring risk. risk from a scientific perspective is very different to other disciplines. scientists are extremely cautious about attributing too much certainty to a result.

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

See above. this scenario often creates a skewed view of the certainty of a situation or outcome such that something (like global warming) that is backed by huge amounts of science seems to be more open to challenge than it really is.

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

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

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 benefit is to open up public awareness and hopefully therefore discussion about new discoveries and advances early. however the big risk is over-promising when people outside the scientific community do not understand that the normal time scales for moving from preliminary research to something that directly impacts their life is 10-20+ years.

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

This depends on how the conference selects presented data. if there has been a robust peer review step in the selection of speakers then you can have somewhat more confidence in the quality of the research. however until the science has been published it has not been exposed to the analysis of a broad community of minds who are expert/knowledgable and therefore able to validate quality.

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?

The benefit is that the more people we have talking about science the more acceptable and accessible scientific literacy becomes for the public. The risk is that we can't be experts in everything and it can be incredibly difficult to sift out the well informed, high quality information. This is an issue of what/who can be trusted.

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?

This biggest challenge I think is that very few people have the objectivity to see the often conflicting interests and demands on the stakeholders. These tensions often result in mistrust and misrepresentation. I think the rapid increase in young people interested in science communication will naturally shift this paradigm, to one where there is much more collaboration between scientists and the media. I think this process could be expedited by facilitating better relationships between scientists and the media well in advance of a breaking story.

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?

The public has an appetite for science information but huge variability in understanding of the scientific method and the processes used to validate and test scientific results. This juxtaposition is the root cause of many misunderstandings. Learning about risk and understanding how science works, not just scientific fact would be a great addition to the school curriculum but I am not sure it is the role of journalists to educate people in this. If for no other reason than it isn't really "newsworthy"!

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?

I think I made my views on this fairly clear above. I am a huge advocate of lively debate, it is through controversy that we find the more likely truth. However controversy for controversy's sake is dangerous.