

**smc****Science Media Centre***where science meets the headlines***issue 3**
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letter from the SMC

Simon Pearson, Night Editor on *The Times* and a member of the Science Media Centre board, shocked a prestigious audience of scientists with his rather brutal summary of the realities of life on a daily newspaper:

“There is one basic truth about journalism. Ask the question, ‘Do you want it good, or do you want it now?’ And there is only one answer.”

I often recall this comment when trying to encapsulate what the Science Media Centre does because I think our primary role is to make it easier for hungry news journalists like Simon to have it both ways – to have it good *and* to have it now. Rather than leaving editors, producers and reporters to search for the right scientist when a major science story breaks, the Centre provides every news programme and newsdesk with the best people for the story in the form and time frame that they need them. Whether it’s the latest stem cell breakthrough, an outbreak of avian flu, or power blackouts, journalists need no longer struggle to find a good scientist and accurate information.

In terms of our broader mission, I believe the centre has proved without a doubt that more scientists engaging with the media on controversial stories can make a difference to what the public see and hear. When the SMC mobilised several leading fertility experts to do interviews challenging the latest human cloning claims, they managed to steal the headlines from the would-be cloner, transforming the message relayed to the public.

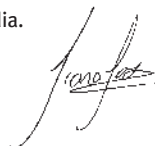
Those of you who may have thought the era of the press conference was dead should turn up at the SMC once a week where you will find up to 20 national media journalists attending background briefings on hot topics in science. As well as generating great science stories, these briefings arm journalists with contacts and background information on stories they will soon be covering. For us, it’s hugely gratifying to recognise material from our briefings turning up in the coverage of major science stories from Prince Charles’s grey goo fears to the Government’s announcement on the Cambridge primate research centre.

The briefings have also become an important vehicle for the scientific community to speak out on issues of shared concern. Policy makers and politicians couldn’t fail to see the media coverage of SMC briefings on the threats posed to scientific research from the EU Clinical Trials and Stem Cell directives to the early drafts of the Human Tissue Bill.

To this day it still amazes me that the SMC can deliver what the media needs when we don’t employ a single working scientist or produce any science ourselves. The simple reason is that we know a lot of press officers who do, and it is the collaboration with our friends in science press offices throughout the country that enables us to be a success.

And I must pay tribute to the other group of people who keep us going – our sponsors. Listed on the back page, these sponsors neither ask nor get anything for their generosity. Their support is a much-appreciated investment in improving the relationship between science and the media.

I hope you enjoy this race through our recent activities. At 2 years old we are more confident than ever that we have a strong mandate for what we do from both science and the media.



Fiona Fox
Director, Science Media Centre

British scientists warn EU rules

Scientists attack over

working with the media

While staff at the Centre now respond to a daily round of general media enquiries, the SMC is at its best when major science stories hit the headlines.



rapid reaction

Once alerted to a major, breaking news story, the team drop everything to contact the best experts on the issue and persuade them to make time to do media work. We then offer this list of experts to every news programme and paper. By making it so easy for journalists to reach the best scientists, the rapid reaction service is helping the Centre meet its goals of ensuring that the public get better access to accurate, evidence-based information.

Here's a taste of just a few of the stories we have responded to:

When the lights go out...

The power failure that plunged the US into darkness last summer prompted mass media coverage. We were able to find electrical engineers who could talk to the media about why the blackout was happening and whether a similar problem could arise in the UK. The scientists featured widely in the print and broadcast media.

Zavos and his cloning claims

Following in the footsteps of the Raelian cult, this year it was the turn of Panos Zavos to announce that he had cloned a human. As he flew to London to announce this news on a Saturday afternoon, the SMC quickly found a number of leading fertility experts who could talk to the media about his claims. The scientists got stuck into two days of back-to-back interviews and by the following day had stolen the limelight with headlines of 'scientists condemn Zavos' appearing in many papers.

Avian flu hits the East

Earlier this year, avian flu rapidly spread amongst poultry populations in the east, along the way claiming several human lives. While the virus has not to-date transformed into one that can pass from human-to-human, the media asked whether it could, and if so, what could we do about it. The SMC, with help from the press officers on our database, found experts who could answer these questions and talk to the media about the virus. We also helped to set up a package for BBC News on vaccine work at the National Institute for Biological Standards and Control in Potters Bar.

MMR in the news again...

When media revelations about Andrew Wakefield appeared to be providing yet another media platform for those who promote the case for a link between MMR and autism, we phoned newsdesks to offer scientists who would balance these fears with evidence based information to reassure parents. They appeared on Sky News, BBC television and radio throughout the day.



rounding up reaction

When we have the luxury of advanced information about major stories, like government announcements or new research in *Nature* or *Science*, we have the time to round up comments from the scientific community and offer these to journalists as they produce their stories. Specialist science, health and environment reporters find the SMC's Round-Up press releases a really useful guide to mainstream scientists reactions to a story. Print journalists often lift the quotes for their articles and broadcast journalists can see at a glance whom they could interview and what they have to say.

Here are just some of the stories we have gathered comment on:

More money for genetics

The news that the government had decided to increase spending on genetics research was just begging for comment from the scientific community. The comments that we sent out were used in the *Daily Mail*, *The Independent*, *Financial Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *Daily Mirror* and *The Times*.

Decisions on sex selection

The results of the HFEA's consultation exercise were extensively reported in the media. We sourced comments from fertility experts, geneticists, and ethicists to feed into this coverage.

A new primate centre?

It was rather a 'will they, won't they' story with the Cambridge primate centre last year. We rounded up reaction to the news that the Cambridge centre had been given the go-ahead and, a few months later, to news that Cambridge had decided not to continue with this venture. Our quotes were used extremely widely in both cases with the commentators taking part in print and broadcast coverage.

Korean stem cell breakthrough

More cloning, but this time of the therapeutic not reproductive kind. Scientists in Korea announced that they had made the first stem-cell line from cloned embryos to intense media interest. We quickly gathered comment from scientists, ethicists and patient groups to outline the significance of this breakthrough and to discuss some of the wider concerns around cloning. Broadcast and print coverage was widespread.

GM gets the green light

As Margaret Beckett opened the door to the growing of the first GM crops in the UK, the SMC set up over 25 interviews with the scientists involved in the experiments underpinning the decision. Quotes from the Round-Up release were used in almost every paper.

For more information on our rapid reactions and round-ups, please see our website www.ScienceMediaCentre.org



scientists speak out

It's hard to pigeonhole the SMC's briefings as they come in a range of shapes and sizes and we are always open to doing new subjects in new ways. However we are constantly mindful of our wider goals in selecting which briefings we run and almost all of them are on issues that are already in the headlines or likely to make an appearance. Many are offered as backgrounders for a story with the hope that we will have some impact on its coverage. Others are joint efforts, such as the briefing on multi-drug resistant TB held with the World Health Organisation. To the extent that we have developed certain identifiable types of briefing, here are some highlights:

backgrounders

Designed to provide journalists with background information on an issue that is likely to hit the headlines in the near future. Our hope is that we can influence the way these issues will be covered by providing the journalists with access to great contacts and balanced, evidence-based information on the subject. For example, journalists covering the two major announcements on the Cambridge primate centre used contacts and information from our backgrounder on why primates are needed in animal research. The notes from our backgrounder last Spring on a little known area of science called nanotechnology were suddenly in demand a month later when Prince Charles used the front page of the *Mail on Sunday* to air his fears of self-replicating nanobots turning the world into grey goo.

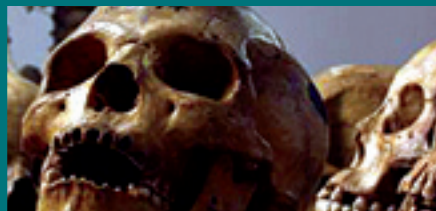
Other background briefings include:

Can aviation solve its environmental problems?

Flood! – Is flooding on the increase and what can science do to minimize the impact?

Replacements for animal research – How science is working to reduce animal research.

Biobank UK – Briefing journalists on the project and answering criticisms.



scientists speak out on threats research

One of the key roles of the Centre is to facilitate and support scientists to speak out to the media about areas of shared concern. Individual scientists or institutions concerned about the impact of certain policy decisions on scientific research can amplify their voices by speaking out together at the SMC's neutral venue.

The following briefings all attracted at least 15 national media journalists and enjoyed extensive media coverage in popular media:

- Human Tissue Bill – A threat to medical research?
- Is Transplant Policy in the UK in crisis?
- Proposed EU chemicals legislation – looking at the real impact.
- Clinical trials under threat?
- The science of old bones – should ancient human remains used in scientific research be repatriated.



taking a risk

One of the things we are keen to do is show that it's not only NGOs and campaign groups who are concerned about the possible risks of new technologies. The scientific community are well placed to spot any emerging risks and to identify the measures needed to respond. While we're acutely aware that these briefings carry

their own risk of generating scare stories, we think it's important for scientists to brief the media on these issues and hopefully promote a better understanding of the scientific community's approach to risk.

Recent risk briefings include:

- Nanoparticles – a new threat to health?
- Extreme dieting – Losing weight but at what risk?
- Endocrine disruptors – A threat to human health and wildlife?
- Chemical and biological terrorism – What are the real risks?



launching reports and research

With our reputation for organising a good press briefing now widely acknowledged, we are increasingly being asked to run press launches on behalf of groups of scientists and experts. In recent months this has put us at the heart of some major science stories including the launch of the Post-14 Inquiry into Maths Education and the publication of the results of the Farm Scale Evaluations on GM crops. We've also really enjoyed playing host to *Science* and *Nature* who have launched some of their most important new research papers from the Centre.

Some examples of these briefings include:

- The launch of the Brooms Barn Research on GM and weed control.
- The launch of the new Imperial College/ GlaxoSmithKline/MRC Imaging Centre.
- The launch of the World Health Organisation report on multi-drug resistant TB.
- ACRE recommendations to Government on GM.
- For a list of all our briefings, check out our website www.ScienceMediaCentre.org

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enhancing the relationship between scientists and the media



nanotechnology in a nutshell

Grey goo, nanobots taking over the world, nanoparticles flying through the air and nanochips revolutionising technology...

As nanotechnology becomes a hot issue, more and more newsdesks are being hit with stories full of these mystifying terms. But they are busy places and no-one has a spare moment to go trawling for definitions and even less time to work out what it's all about.

To give them a helping hand, the SMC has been compiling advice from expert scientists in the field to make a quick glossary of all the main terms, a rundown of all the issues and a list of one-stop contacts for more information. Here is one small guide that can explain exactly what a nanoparticle is, give you a grasp on how small that actually is and provide the knowledge for you to decide whether the latest story on nanobots taking over the world is nonsense or not. And to ensure it is useful and useable, it has been thoroughly checked by journalists.

Nanotechnology in a Nutshell will be arriving in the next few months to join our already popular *Genetics in a Nutshell*. For copies, check out our website or call 020 7670 2980.

Funding

Of course, the SMC would be nowhere without our funders. They generously support us and enable us to do all that you've just been reading about with no other return. However, to maintain our independence, we limit their generosity to a top donation of just 5% of our running costs per year so we always welcome new funders. If you would like to support the SMC in continuing our activities and more in the future, please get in touch on 020 7670 2980.

A very special thanks should go to John Ritblat who donated £120,000 to transform a derelict wing of the Ri into our wonderful press centre.

peer review in a soundbite

Peer review is an integral part of the scientific process yet, according to a recent MORI poll commissioned by the SMC and *Nature*, "75% of the British public have no idea what peer review in scientific publications means or can't define it correctly."

So when a scientist is confronted by a journalist asking what they think of research claiming to reveal the secret to eternal life, the scientists response that we shouldn't trust the research as it's not been peer reviewed is going to leave a large proportion of the British public mystified and no more sure of whether they'll live forever.

But the poll also revealed that "the vast majority (71%) of the public favour replication or the kind of scrutiny provided by peer review." So, if they understood what the scientist was talking about, they would perhaps be a lot more confident in their answer and a little less sure of seeing the year 3000.

Our new guide *Peer Review in a Soundbite*, compiled from a brainstorm with top scientists, journalists and press officers, provides advice tailored to the 2-minute time frame of a news interview to help scientists effectively explain what they are talking about when they refer to peer review and enable them to use the opportunity of a media interview to explain a bit more about how science works.

For copies, or any more publications from this series of guides sponsored by Copus, please go to our website or call 020 7670 2980.

SMC on tour

Although we usually bring the scientists and journalists to us for our many briefings and events, the team aren't averse to getting out and about ourselves. After two years living and breathing science in the headlines, we've got lots of experiences to share.

Among last years action packed calendar, we gave a presentation to the Office of Science and Technology on trends in media coverage of science. We've visited universities including Queens, Belfast and Green College, Oxford to show them why going out and speaking to the media is so important. We also gave talks to budding journalists on the prestigious Reuter's trainee programme and the renowned City University journalism course.

We are happy to speak at conferences where we have a captive audience of scientists to get our messages of participation and engagement with the media across to. Recently Fiona travelled to Brussels to speak to a large audience of European scientists about nanotechnology and genetic modification.

All of these activities ensure that our frontline experience is shared with those who can really help us improve it.

Funders

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