



smc

Science Media Centre

where science meets the headlines

issue 4
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letter from the SMC

Because the Science Media Centre does not promote our brand name in the media, many of you may not know that we are involved with a significant number of the big science stories hitting the news.

For example, you might not know that the SMC ran the press conference launching *Nature's* publication of the discovery of a new species of dwarf human ancestor – widely acknowledged as ‘the’ science story of the year. Or that Ian Wilmut briefed journalists here about his application for a licence to do therapeutic cloning, or that those stories you have read about dodgy cancer websites, alcohol & health and growing vaccines in GM crops all originated from the centre. This newsletter is our way of updating you about what we have been up to.

The SMC's forte remains our ability to bring the best science to bear on the national media's coverage of some of the most controversial issues. Far from playing safe by dealing only with the quality end of science journalism, the SMC goes out of its way to ensure that scientists are getting their messages to the widest possible section of society by engaging with the tabloid media and the main TV and radio news programmes.

Of course, putting controversial issues into the headlines carries risks, but time and time again the lesson from this centre is that when scientists seize the initiative and give the media good stories on controversial issues like nanotechnology, GM crops and therapeutic cloning, the public get access to a more balanced account of these developments. (see page 3)

One of the issues identified in the House of Lords' report that prompted the creation of the SMC was the huge gulf between the cultures of science and the media. One highlight of the year was the success of our 'Introduction to the News Media' event aimed at immersing scientists in the strange, alien culture of life as a news journalist and building respect for, and a willingness to adapt to, the pressures and constraints on journalists. (see page 4)

We also seek out opportunities to improve journalists' understanding of the way science works. Members of the SMC team have run sessions on best practice in science reporting for trainee journalists on the prestigious Reuters training programme and City University masters course, and I spoke at the BBC's internal news festival in the New Year.

In addition, the SMC continues to publish our popular guides for scientists and journalists. We have added '*Nanotechnology in a Nutshell*' to our series for newsdesks, and are about to add '*Communicating Scientific Uncertainty in a Soundbite*' to previous guides for scientists on peer review, animal research and risk.

On top of all this, the priority of the centre is still to provide the news media with the best possible science when controversial stories hit the headlines. By offering great scientists ready to engage in stories from animal research, dangerous chemicals in the bloodstream, to Prince Charles's latest musings on nanotechnology, the SMC is helping to ensure that the public see and hear evidence-based science. (see page 2)

I hope you enjoy this newsletter and, as ever, would really appreciate feedback on what we're doing and ideas on issues we should be tackling in the future.

Fiona Fox

Director, Science Media Centre

GO-AHEAD FOR HUMAN CLONES

Research

working with the media

by TOM SAVAGE

The Science Media Centre deals with a large number of enquiries from the press on a daily basis, but when science hits the front pages the team drops everything to find the best experts to provide comment to all the national news media.

By ensuring that journalists have access to scientists when they need them, the SMC helps to get the best evidence-based information out to the public. With our growing list of contacts, all prepared to respond quickly when we give them a call, we can put together round-up press releases of comments faster than ever before. We give these to the media as they prepare their stories, providing a great source of quotes for print journalists and giving broadcast media a list of potential interviewees.

Here are just a few of the stories the SMC has reacted to:



Prince Charles on nanotechnology

In an article in the *Independent on Sunday*, Prince Charles warned of the potential risk of thalidomide-style disasters as nanotechnology progresses. The SMC found scientists willing to sacrifice their Sunday to give interviews discussing this new technology and how science is already working to uncover any risks associated with nanoparticles. The scientists were used by a number of national newspapers and the *Today Programme*, while our new 'Nanotechnology in a Nutshell' leaflet proved popular with journalists.

Obesity report

This year there has been much concern about the health of the nation. When the Health Select Committee published its report into obesity, we ensured that scientific experts in the fields of genetics, physiology and nutrition got a say in the discussion.

New regulations to deal with animal rights extremists

The debate surrounding animal research and the actions of animal rights protesters has not been out of the news for long. When the government announced new measures to deal with animal rights extremists, the SMC gathered comment from leading medical scientists including some that have been victims of the extremists.

New guidelines for saviour siblings

In July, the HFEA relaxed its guidelines on pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), or tissue typing, to allow creation of saviour siblings to help children with serious genetic conditions. We brought Simon Fishel, a leading fertility expert, and Shahana & Raj Hashmi, whose child has a serious genetic disorder, to the SMC for the day to give back-to-back broadcast interviews. Comments from our round-up press release were read out live on *BBC News* 24 minutes after we sent it out and our quotes were used by most national newspapers.

Death of Francis Crick

Following the sad news of the death of Nobel Laureate Francis Crick, the SMC was overwhelmed with scientists wishing to pay their respects. We rapidly put together a round-up press release that was used in almost every national newspaper.

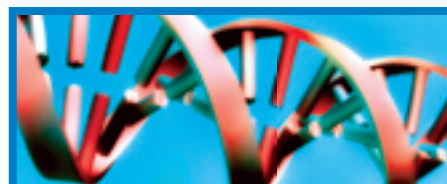


New combined jabs for babies

In the wake of MMR, the leak of plans for a new 5-in-1 immunisation for babies was expected to raise the concerns of the general public. The SMC was on hand to find vaccine experts to face the tough challenge of explaining to the public why the new combined jab would not overload the immune systems of babies. The scientists did a great job in broadcast and print interviews and the media on the whole dubbed the vaccine as 'safe'.

Mouse virgin birth

Earlier this year *Nature* reported the birth of a laboratory mouse with two mothers and no father through a process called parthenogenesis. Knowing there would be large-scale media interest, the SMC provided journalists with a round-up press release of quotes which helped to explain the science behind this work and discussed the implications for human fertility. These were used extensively by the national media.



Human cloning licence

Following the announcement of the first licence for human therapeutic cloning in the UK, we rounded up comment from stem cell experts. We offered national newsdesks leading scientists who could discuss the important difference between reproductive and therapeutic cloning and answer questions about the hopes for stem cell research.

Building firm pulls out of new animal research centre

It was late in the afternoon when the announcement came that construction of the new Oxford animal research lab had halted after intimidation by animal rights extremists. The SMC provided quotes within the hour from scientists whose research is dependent on using animals and provided the broadcast media with interviewees willing to drop everything to debate the use of animals in research.

We have responded to many more stories than we can mention here. To see these and read the round-up press releases we have sent out, please visit our website

www.ScienceMediaCentre.org

Never mind the weather overkill: scientists praise Hollywood's global warning

Research centre to develop animal testing alternatives

scientists speak out

The centre is now hosting briefings generating exciting and important science stories in the national media on average once a week. Here's a list of briefings run since the last newsletter; for more see

www.ScienceMediaCentre.org

Open access and the future of science publishing

After being lobbied by journalists for a briefing on this, the SMC brought leading proponents and opponents of the open access model to outline their case to the media.

Call for new approach to battle against malaria

Two leading scientists briefed journalists on their research, calling for a radical re-think of malaria treatments for the developing world.

Diet and cancer: can what we eat really reduce our risk of getting cancer?

Lots of stories about the benefits of brussel sprouts followed this briefing on the importance of certain vegetables in preventing cancer.

The transit of Venus across the Sun

Three distinguished speakers spoke about the past, present and future of this key astronomical event as it approached.

The Day After Tomorrow – science fact or science fiction

The SMC teamed up with the Met Office to take David King, Chief Scientific Advisor, and leading UK climate change experts to the movies to see Hollywood blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow*. Their movie review the following morning to a room full of journalists and camera crews was a great opportunity to get their messages across.

It's official – your social standing can shorten your life!

Michael Marmot, Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health at UCL, briefed journalists on his new book *Status Syndrome*.

New WHO report

The WHO asked the SMC to help launch their new report on the overall impact of the environment on child health throughout Europe.

Growing the future

Experts from the John Innes Centre discussed the amazing potential of non-food crops.

Fatty acids – are we getting enough?

Two leading experts gave the Sunday papers a preview of some of the science to be presented at the 6th Congress of the International Society for the Study of Fatty Acids and Lipids.

MRSA and other hospital acquired infections

While the furore over MRSA made it hard to get balanced messages into the headlines, the SMC worked with scientists from the HPA and Hammersmith Hospital to brief reporters on this story.

Meet DEFRA's new Science Advisory Council

Prof Roy Anderson, the Chair of a new Science Advisory Council set up to provide ministers with independent advice, and DEFRA's Chief Scientific Advisor, Prof Howard Dalton, discussed the group's future plans.

Launch of research to grow pharmaceuticals in crops

Despite fears that the media would focus only on the risks of research into growing vaccines in crops, Prof Julian Ma and Prof Phil Dale were delighted that the journalists who attended this briefing also reported the potential for treating some of mankind's most devastating diseases including AIDS, TB, rabies and diabetes.

Genes and aggression

We welcomed three leading US scientists, here for a Royal Society of Medicine conference, to discuss how the interplay between genes and environment influences behaviour.

The future of energy

Three leading energy experts answered journalists' questions on all the latest energy issues from nuclear power to renewables.

ID cards

Experts discussed the role science will play in the implementation of identity cards.

Complementary medicine: con or cure?

Professor Edzard Ernst's warnings of websites offering bogus cures for cancer became front-page news in several newspapers following this briefing.

Briefing on forthcoming global disasters

Warnings of tsunamis, earthquakes, super-volcanoes and asteroid impacts may have sounded outlandish in mid-August but proved to be a timely background briefing.

The importance of Vitamin D for human health

Experts reminded journalists of the importance of Vitamin D for health and also cautioned the public against focusing only on the dangers of sunshine.

Ian Wilmut's cloning application

Ian Wilmut and his colleagues briefed the press on how their application to the HFEA to perform therapeutic cloning offers new hope for Motor Neurone Disease sufferers.

Briefing on Gulf War Illness

In the week before the findings of Lord Lloyd's inquiry into Gulf War Illness, four leading experts ensured that journalists knew the latest scientific evidence on possible causes.

Launch of CERRIE final report

The broad-based Committee Examining Radiation Risks of Internal Emitters (CERRIE) asked the SMC to launch their final report.

The discovery of a new species of hominid

There was great excitement when *Nature* asked the SMC to organise a press conference to launch their 'Hobbit' story. Undoubtedly 'the' science story of the year.

Bionanotechnology – what the future really holds

Working on the basis that the public need to know about both the risks and benefits of bionanotechnology, the SMC borrowed top speakers from a Royal Society of Chemistry conference to brief journalists on the promise of this new area.

Chris Patten on science

In advance of his first major speech as Chancellor of Oxford at the Save British Science AGM, Chris Patten spoke about animal research and the need for blue-skies research.

Genes and behaviour

Professor Tim Spector, who conducts research on twins, announced his new research into the influence of genes on infidelity.

Alcohol

In a briefing for the Sunday papers, Morten Gronbaek from the Centre for Alcohol Research in Copenhagen, discussed the results of his study into the drinking habits of 57,000 people in Denmark.

Cannabis and mental health

Experts discussed the neurobiology of cannabis including Prof Jim van Os unveiling newly published research on the links between cannabis and psychosis.

Launch of the Environment Agency's first science strategy

The Environment Agency unveiled its new strategy emphasising the use of science to inform its regulatory work.

5-IN-1 JAB

THE TIMES TUESDAY AUGUST

The deadly hazards of Minuscule machines,

NEWS NANOTECHNOLOGY

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enhancing the relationship between scientists and the media

In November, over 200 scientists from all corners of the UK, spanning a multitude of research disciplines, made their way to London for the Science Media Centre's inaugural 'Introduction to the News Media' event. Sponsored by Elsevier, this meeting offered scientists an opportunity to get a real taste of how the news media works and see just how important it is to engage with it, especially when science is in the headlines.

The SMC was established with the laudable but difficult aim of improving relations between the two very different disciplines of science and the media. With their conflicting objectives, needs and demands, the two pursuits stand far apart. Yet it is our belief that this chasm can be bridged by improving mutual understanding of how each discipline works. The 'Introduction to the Media' meeting for scientists was planned with this in mind.

To reach as many scientists as possible in one go, we decided to move away from the traditional skills-focused, media-training, that teaches the mechanics of a Radio Norberrry interview or Paxman encounter, which is more suited to small groups. Instead we piloted a meeting where scientists could experience a broader insight into the culture of the news media, hearing about the realities and workings of the news machine from those based within it. We targeted this at those scientists who were not hugely media-experienced but perhaps felt

they should, or needed to be, engaging with the media more. As with all SMC activities, it was organised with an eye to science in the headlines.

We opened with Simon Pearson, Night News Editor of *The Times*, giving a news-eye view of just where scientists stand with the media today. He pointed out that, although scientists are doing much better on the features pages of newspapers and magazines, they need to 'stand up and be counted in the eyes of the news media'. Vivienne Parry, science journalist, followed him to the stage to give her top practical tips for scientists doing news interviews. Drawing from her wealth of print and broadcast experience, her advice ranged from considering your audience: remember you're speaking to the listening public not just Bob back in the lab during your radio interview, to style tips: comb your hair and avoid dangly earrings for those TV experiences.

The whistle-stop media tour continued with a panel of speakers including a producer from the BBC's *Today Programme*, the Health Editor of *The Sun* and the Science Correspondent of *The Daily Telegraph*. This was an opportunity for the audience to direct questions to this trio of working journalists. Discussion ranged from reasons to talk to tabloids and why some areas of science seem to take a back seat, to how to communicate the shades of grey within science during a polarised, black & white debate.

Having heard some of the hows, whats and whys of engaging with the media, we gave the audience some case studies of news stories that the Science Media Centre have worked on, showing how scientists engaging with the news media can make a marked difference to the eventual reporting. Next came Cherry Lewis, Press Officer at Bristol University, to talk about the role of the press office in an institution. She encouraged scientists to make contact and build closer relations with their communications team. Finally, the meeting was rounded off with an inspiring presentation from Professor Chris Higgins of the Medical Research Council, a scientist who has chosen to engage with the news media. He spoke to the audience about his own unique experiences, why he decided to take the media plunge and the difference he feels he is making.

This event attracted so many scientists and has received such positive feedback that the SMC is making this an annual fixture of its calendar. We hope that, as well as giving a picture of how the news media works, it will encourage more scientists to engage with the media especially when science hits the top of the news agenda.

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. To maintain our independence, we limit their generosity to a top donation of just 5% of our running costs per year.

We always welcome new funders. If you would like to support the SMC in continuing our activities 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.

Funders

AAAS	British Transplantation Society Council	ExxonMobil	Pfizer Limited
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