



Science Media Centre
where science meets the headlines

issue 5
spring 2006



letter from the SMC

Welcome to the Science Media Centre's newsletter – designed for those not in regular contact with the centre to have a quick look through what we've been up to. As you will see, the level of activity is frenetic. In 2005, 47 of our 50 briefings generated national media coverage; we were directly responsible for 33 science stories on the BBC *The Today Programme*; and the SMC was involved with an amazing 62 stories in the *Daily Mail*.

As the centre develops I am struck by the extent to which we are now a resource used by much of the scientific community – uniquely the centre is your press office. Our success in attracting the UK's science, health and environment correspondents to our centre twice weekly becomes an opportunity for you to include your science in reports on the hottest topics of the day.

These days the majority of our press briefings (see page 3) are on topics brought to us by press officers, scientists or journalists – in the early days these were largely our own ideas. For example, on my first day back after Christmas I was lobbied with four proposals. Roger Highfield, science editor at the Daily Telegraph, asked us to assemble the UK's leading cloning experts to assess the impact of the Hwang scandal. Tom Parkhill at the Society for Endocrinology suggested a briefing to mark the 50th anniversary of the contraceptive pill. Then SMC Board member Vivienne Parry came to us concerned about press releases promoting bogus bird flu cures. Finally, Asher Minns at the Tyndall Centre wanted the SMC to help announce the results of Nick Pidgeon's research into public attitudes on nuclear power and climate change. These proposals all became successful SMC briefings so please keep the ideas and experts coming.

Another issue highlighted in this newsletter is how the media covers risk. Despite intense lobbying by many of you, it has been difficult to come up with the right format for an event. Eventually we settled on a 'Risk Dinner' for editors (see page 4). The discussion was heated and stimulating and once again supported my belief that scientists must engage with the media differently before we will see radical changes in science reporting. This message was reinforced at our second 'Introduction to the Media' event in November. Sponsored by Elsevier and Blackwell Publishing, these seminars are now a regular feature of the SMC calendar (see page 4).

Given the centre's clear brief to tackle controversial science stories, the issue of animal research has been a high priority. In November, over 80 scientists who were reluctant to speak out on this issue heard from others who believe passionately that we need to (see page 4). This activity trebled the number of scientists signing up with us to talk about animal research.

Amongst all our activities, the front line for the SMC is breaking news. On bird flu, the Buncefield oil explosion, and the revelations from Korea about stem cell fraud, the SMC's rapid reaction service ensured that the news media had access to respected experts and accurate information as the stories were breaking (see page 2). It is this service, more than anything, that achieves the centre's wider goal of ensuring that the public and policy makers have access to the best science when they most need it.

As we enter our fourth year we are even more evangelical about our original philosophy – that the media will start 'doing' science better when scientists start 'doing' media better. And we now have a string of examples to prove just that!

Fiona Fox

Director, Science Media Centre

DON'T PANIC

Blair plea as lethal H5N1 strain found in dead swan

working with the media

The SMC's well-established strap line – 'where science meets the headlines' – is no better exemplified than during the times when science underpins the day's news story and makes it on to the front page.

Our rapid-reaction and round-up press releases put expert scientists' voices into the UK national print and broadcast news media and ensure that the media has the best resources to get evidence-based information to the public.

The team has now built relationships with nearly 1500 scientists and is assured of finding the best experts to provide comment to all the national news media. This sometimes happens with little or no notice – it is not unusual for us to speak to a scientist at twelve thirty and find them interviewed on TV news at one o'clock!

Here is a small selection of the stories that the SMC has reacted to over the last year:



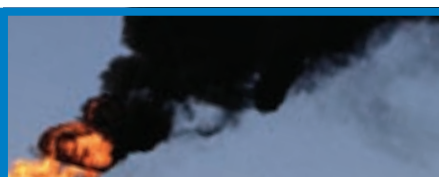
Bird flu

One story that has hardly left the headlines over the last year is H5N1 avian influenza. As well as the daily deluge of media enquiries, the team has also reacted pro-actively on eight occasions when there have been major new developments. The range of scientists found by the centre reflects the diversity of the science underpinning this story – the media has heard from vets, virologists, vaccine scientists, epidemiologists, protein crystallographers, immunologists and complementary medicine experts, among others!

London terrorist attacks

Half of the SMC's four staff members made it in to the centre on the morning of 7 July 2005 and worked tirelessly to find experts for the media to interview about this tragic event. A week later it was announced that the attackers might have used explosives produced from household

chemicals, so the centre found experts to explain the science behind this story.

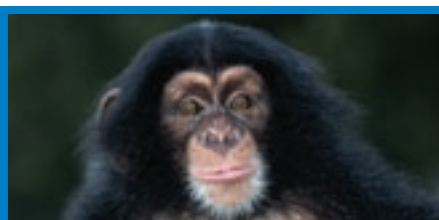


Buncefield oil explosion

As dramatic pictures of a huge plume of black smoke dominated the visual media, the SMC found experts to speak about the potential effects of this disaster on those inhaling the smoke and for the surrounding ecology.

Stem cells, cloning and embryology

The SMC has charted the peaks and pitfalls of research in this controversial area through its press release services. The top researchers in this field have worked closely with the centre to provide expert comment for the media. Together we have contributed to coverage of the rise and fall of Prof Hwang Woo-Suk; the availability of human eggs for stem cell research; the review of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act; the granting of an HFEA licence to the Newcastle Centre for Life; and Panos Zavos' failure to clone a human embryo.



Chimp genome

When the chimpanzee genome was published in *Nature*, the SMC was primed to provide a geneticist, an evolutionary biologist, and a palaeontologist to comment on this important scientific development.

Animal research

The news media is desperate for good scientists to provide accurate information about work involving animal research and the issues surrounding this controversial subject. We have been pleased to work with the media and many

top scientists to ensure representation of scientific opinion in at least five separate animal research stories over the last year. This has injected science into the discussion of an issue with many and diverse stakeholders.



Face transplant

In November 2005 it was announced that a woman in France was to undergo the world's first face transplant following serious injuries she sustained after being bitten by her dog. Surgeons and science ethicists gave comments to the full range of UK national newspapers.

Food labelling

The Food Standards Agency recently announced plans to make labels on food more informative for the general public. Five top food scientists gave their thoughts on this strategy and were represented in at least seven different national news reports as a direct result of the SMC's round-up press release.

Features and packages

Our involvement with the media occasionally extends beyond our traditional rapid reaction into longer-term projects such as features and packages. Working within our remit of dealing with controversial science stories we have ensured journalists and scientists work effectively together on stories such as Prince Charles and alternative medicine, DNA vaccines for avian flu, monoclonal antibodies for treating disease, and how the media and scientists deal with sceptics. This has included work with BBC *The Today Programme*, *The Observer*, *BBC Online*, *The Times* and *Nature* magazine.

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

Do mobiles cause brain cancer? There's no sign of it, say scientists

scientists speak out

The centre has been busier than ever, with amazing scientists coming through our doors, helping to create sound science stories in the national media on too many topics to list. Here are some of our favourites; for a full list see www.sciencemediacentre.org

Consensus statement on childhood leukaemia

Leading leukaemia experts involved in the UK Childhood Cancer Study announced their consensus statement on the most significant causes of childhood leukaemia and their insights into possible future prevention.



PGD for late onset disorders

Pre-implantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD) is already used to screen for diseases that affect the sufferer after early adulthood such as Huntington's disease and some cancers. As the technology rapidly progresses, we gathered experts to outline its future potential and some of the ethical and regulatory issues it raises.

Autism research – what the future holds

Coinciding with the launch of the National Alliance for Autism Research (NAAR) we brought six of the UK's leading autism experts to brief journalists on the latest research into causes and treatment of autism.

Alternatives to animal research

The National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research announced its first grants for promising new research projects into alternatives to animal research.

Avian flu: new research published in *Nature* and *Science*

Key research published in top journals *Science* and *Nature* examined how a human avian flu pandemic could be contained at source. The papers' authors briefed journalists on their findings.

Transgenic animals

The Home Office statistics on animal procedures carried out in scientific research showed an increase due to the use of transgenic animals. Scientists explained how these are being used to understand the function of different genes.

Verifying nuclear tests

Experts explained the science behind an International Monitoring System developed by the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organisation to monitor whether countries are breaking the ban on nuclear testing.

Future of manned space travel

The Columbia shuttle disaster in 2003 dampened the enthusiasm for involvement in human space flight. The Royal Astronomical Society commission re-examined the evidence and presented its findings in the report 'The Scientific Case for Human Space Flight'.

Plugging the UK energy gap

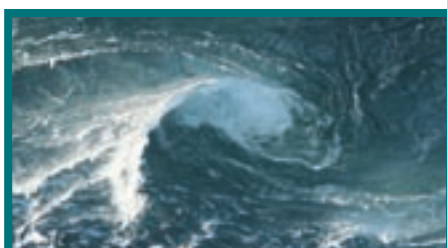
Can Renewables fill the gap, or does nuclear power need to be back on the agenda? Experts presented results from the Geological Society of London conference on the impending energy gap, detailing suggestions for UK governmental energy policy.

Children and mental health

Following the Institute of Psychiatry conference *The Child is Father of the Man: Lifespan Perspectives In Psychiatry*, six leading experts spoke on issues including whether treatments like anti-depressants and double psychotherapy should be given to children and whether ADHD is under- or over-diagnosed.

University of Oxford announces...

Building work has resumed on the new laboratory complex at South Parks Road. An official from the University briefed the press on the need for this controversial new biomedical research facility.



Could the Atlantic current switch off?

To coincide with new data published in *Nature*, researchers from the UK's National Oceanography Centre briefed the media on the weakening of currents derived from the Gulf Stream, which could cool European weather within decades.

Earliest record of human activity in Northern Europe

Revolutionary dating techniques suggest human activity in Northern Europe 200,000 years earlier than previously thought. The authors of a *Nature* paper challenged the current understanding of how ancestral Europeans migrated from South to North and to the UK.

Fertility rumble

Journalists were given the chance to question leading fertility experts on procedures currently under review or public consultation by the DoH or HFEA. These topics included sex selection, regulating IVF, PGD for late onset disorders, single-embryo transfer, the post-code lottery of access, and quality.

Impact of Hwang inquiry on UK cloning research

As investigations in South Korea confirmed the extent of fraudulent data from Hwang's team, top UK scientists answered questions from journalists on cloning research in the UK. Speakers included Alison Murdoch, Stephen Minger, Chris Shaw, Robin Lovell-Badge and Anne McLaren.

Accessing personal data for medical research

Authors presented a report by the *Academy of Medical Sciences* highlighting bureaucracy, confusing regulations and constraints on researchers' access to health data in the UK.

Mobile phones and gliomas

A study in the *British Medical Journal* shows no link between mobile phone use and glioma – the most common form of adult brain tumour. Two researchers presented their findings in the context of past and future research into mobile phone safety.

Nanotechnology and human health

Nanotech products hold great promise for revolutionising product manufacture, communications and disease treatment. Dr Andrew Maynard briefed journalists on his inventory of government-funded nanotechnology research and the uncertainties about health, safety and environmental impacts.

Avian flu treatments – what works?

A vast array of products claim efficacy against H5N1 avian flu, from elderberry extracts to mega doses of vitamin C, to sauerkraut, oregano oil, colloidal silver, aloe vera, and garlic. Experts addressed whether these work as well as conventional anti-viral drugs.



UK drought 2006

Scientists from the NERC Centre for Ecology and Hydrology briefed the media on the potentially dramatic consequences of this winter's dry spell for the UK's ecology.



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enhancing the relationship between scientists and the media

Risk Dinner

When a science story garners scary headlines it doesn't deserve, journalists often blame their editors. Although editors of national newspapers rarely venture out of the newsroom, the SMC tempted them with the promise of meeting a senior politician and leading scientists. We organised a dinner hosted by the then Home Secretary Charles Clarke and the John Innes Centre to address the presentation of risk in science news stories. With attendees including editors of the *Metro* and the *Mirror*, a *Daily Mail* political correspondent and leading scientists, a lively debate ensued. Feedback from all who attended was positive and we feel it has already had an impact on the way risk stories, such as the risk from multiple vaccines, are covered in the news.

Introduction to the Media Day

Encouraged by the hugely successful Introduction to the News Media event in 2004, the SMC ran another session in November. Scientists were given an insight into the culture that underlies news reporting by hearing from journalists such as the Head of BBC News Online, science correspondents at *The Times* and *Daily Mail* and the Head of BBC newsgathering. A talk on tips, giving a compendium of practical advice on dealing with the media was also popular. The session was longer and more interactive than its predecessor and the feedback on this change was positive. Around 200 scientists attended and continued demand will make this a regular fixture of the SMC calendar.

Uncertainty in a Soundbite

Scientists are often criticised in the media for appearing to change their minds or being unsure about an issue. It could be that red wine was thought to be bad for your

health and now it is supposed to be good for you, or that scientists can't decide how bad the impact from climate change will be, or that there will be more or less deaths than predicted from emerging diseases such as SARS, variant CJD or avian flu. Those who have carried out scientific research know that science isn't that simple. Often there isn't enough scientific data available to make a perfect prediction, or else the media is only representing one small study in a large field of research, or perhaps science is adding bits of evidence slowly to create a larger, more informative picture. The SMC has produced a leaflet to encourage scientists to use the opportunity of a news interview to explain how scientific findings can lead to uncertainty. This is part of the popular 'How Science Works' series and is available to download from our website: www.sciencemediacentre.org/uncertainty.htm

Animal Research

When animal research is in the news, journalists can struggle to find scientists to interview. Unfortunately the outcome of this can often be a news piece without any comment from the scientific community and without accurate scientific information. Over the last year the SMC has run events to support and encourage scientists and press officers. We ran an event attended by 80 scientists who do animal research and were considering speaking to journalists about their work in the future. They had the opportunity to hear the experiences of those who have spoken about animal research in the media, to be given information about risks of doing media work from a police Superintendent from the National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit, and to hear the journalists'

perspective from a correspondent and producer from the BBC 10 o'clock news. We are building on the success of this event, which trebled the number of scientists available to do a TV interview when animal research hits the news, by running media training sessions. These are designed to help scientists speak about animal research in the media. The first media training session is already oversubscribed and we hope to run further sessions later in the year so everyone who would like media training can benefit.

other news

We will soon be expanding to become a team of five. A donation from the Engineering and Technology Board (ETB) now funds an SMC press officer to take a lead on developing and maintaining our relationship with engineering experts and press officers and deliver new activities to achieve the centre's goals.

Funding

The Science Media Centre would be nowhere without our funders who generously support us and enable us to do all that you've just been reading about.

To find out more about our funding structure or to offer support for the SMC, visit our website:

www.sciencemediacentre.org/funding.htm

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

Abbott Laboratories	Chemical Industry Association (CIA)	Institute of Physics	Royal Astronomical Society (RAS)
American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)	Chilled Food Association (CFA)	Institution of Chemical Engineers (IChemE)	The Royal Society
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British Neuroscience Association (BNA)	Engineering and Technology Board (ETB)	News International Limited	UCB Group
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