

## Sally Appleton – The Daily Telegraph

### Why did I apply for a media fellowship?

I first saw the fellowships advertised in the British Psychological Society magazine several years ago. Although I had been keen to apply since then, this year was the first real opportunity I had to do so with the full support of my employer.

I'm a post-doctoral researcher in health psychology, in particular the psychological aspects of cancer and genetics. My research has involved providing the general public about scientific information that they can understand and use to the benefit of their physical and psychological health. This work has shown me the value of effective communication about science. I wanted the opportunity to experience the constraints and priorities of communicating scientific information from the media perspective and to experience a totally different way of working. The little experience I had with the media until then had not been particularly positive. I wanted the opportunity to change this and improve my confidence dealing with media so that I could view them as an ally to promoting my research.

I did not view the fellowship as a stepping-stone into a media career but rather some professional development which would be an exciting, unique and hopefully valuable experience.

### What did my placement involve?

As I was hoping to get a print placement, I was really pleased to spend the first 3 weeks of my fellowship at the Daily Telegraph in London under the supervision of Roger Highfield, Science Editor. After the initial shock of working in the tallest building in Canary Wharf (for someone with a fear of heights!), I was given a whistle-stop tour of the Telegraph offices and was introduced to the science/health news department.

During the first few days, the stark contrasts between this working environment and academic research became apparent. Journalists have daily deadlines, sometimes only hours away, so had little time for discussion with colleagues, attending meetings, answering phone calls or lunch! When communicating, they need to get straight to the point and need to make quick decisions based on little information. I was also surprised how much time they spent working at their desk.

I gained a range of experiences that constitute the daily work of a science journalist from selecting press releases to cover, conducting telephone interviews of scientists (including one of my own colleagues!), attending press conferences, writing news stories and a science feature (some of which made it

into print!). When they had time, I gained some helpful advice from several people including Roger, David Derbyshire (Science Correspondent) and Celia Hall (Medical Editor).

The final week of my placement was spent with the other media fellows at the BA Festival of Science in Exeter. During this week, my time was split between sourcing good stories from the festival programme for the Daily Telegraph and writing a specified daily news article for the Exeter Express and Echo. Writing for the local paper was a valuable experience as it provided a contrast of writing style and priorities that focused around local interest rather than cutting-edge news.

I had the opportunity to work alongside an impressive array of science journalists in the press centre and at the press conferences where the question and answer sessions were always more revealing than the scientist's presentation. As each journalist was working to similar daily deadlines and often covering the same stories, I felt like I was almost a real science journalist! For me, this was by far the best week of the placement and I started to understand the buzz of the job. I even started to consider a career change into science journalism, even if only for a brief moment!

What did I learn on the placement?

I have gained a number of things from my experiences during the fellowship.

- Greater knowledge of how the media works: This includes how they select and write a good a story, their constraints and priorities (e.g. there is competition among the journalists within each newspaper to get an article published and many articles written each day never get printed). This highlighted the importance of scientists providing good press releases and being prepared/available to be interviewed to the media's tight deadlines.
- Greater awareness of the differences in writing about science in the media and academia: I feel that both groups could still learn a bit more from each other by better appreciation and respect of the differences and similarities!
- Communication: I am able to communicate more effectively about my research both in writing and verbally to a variety of audiences including the general public, academics and health professionals.
- Confidence: My experience has improved confidence in my communication skills and greater knowledge of media has equipped me to deal with them more confidently.
- Communicating science to a lay audience during this fellowship has helped me to see the bigger picture of my research and the direct relevance to the general public.

What were my expectations of the placement and were they met?

Most of my expectations of the fellowship were met. It was certainly an exciting, challenging and unique learning experience. I did gain a broad range of experiences that constitute the daily work of a science journalist.

I had anticipated some of the constraints and priorities of the media, but not others. The hardest challenges were keeping with the pace of work (I would manage to produce just 1 news story per day whilst experienced journalists would be writing 3 or 4!) and adapting to an environment where this pace meant that people had little time for each other. I had hoped that I might be able to influence the way science is portrayed even to a minute degree but I don't feel I was able to achieve this under the pressures of working in this environment.

How will this experience be useful in my future career?

As I am likely to continue working in areas of psychology, cancer and genetics which are of interest to the media and general public, this fellowship has provided me with some valuable skills that are often neglected in the scientific community.

More effective communication skills will help me in securing research funding, recruiting participants and reporting on my results to a variety of audiences. I hope that greater confidence dealing with the media will help me to be more involved in writing press releases, be better equipped for media interviews and be confident to promote my work more pro-actively.

I feel that gaining this fellowship will improve my career prospects within science (I have already been asked about the fellowship in a job interview!). My colleagues feel that this is a worthwhile and interesting scheme that provides opportunities to gain valuable knowledge and develop important skills. I will be able to pass these knowledge and skills on to my future colleagues.

Although I am still not considering a full-time career change into science journalism, this experience has increased my interest in communicating science. I am keen to develop my experience further and use my media contacts to promote my research in the future!

Articles written:

*Daily Telegraph*

18/08/04 – Office psychopaths

19/08/04 – E-mail consulting

*Exeter Express & Echo*

07/09/04 – Muddles of the mind

Articles published:

*Daily Telegraph*

26/08/04 – Watch your backs, couch potatoes told (p9)

08/09/04 – Soon you will enter a deep trance (p16 science feature)

*Exeter Express & Echo*

07/09/04 – New way to treat disease (p13)

10/09/04 – Hypnosis for pain (p12)

10/09/04 – Science of night out (p13 with Martyn Bull)