

Science Communication Conference 24 and 25 May 2004

Workshop 5 - Working with the media

Bob Ward, senior manager for press and public relations, The Royal Society

Bob Ward highlighted The Royal Society's working group that has been set up to carry out a study on best practice in communicating the results of new scientific research to the public. The report, which will be published later this year, will examine what responsibilities scientists have when communicating to the public and why, when and how should scientist do this through the media. Although there are many examples of successful science communication there have been high profile cases surrounded by controversy (GM debate, MMR, BSE, etc) and these have had an effect on the way scientists communicate and on how comfortable they are when talking to the media. The report will also look at the roles of the press office and peer review.

Rachael Buchanan, science producer BBC news

Rachael Buchanan gave a presentation on the role of the media from her perspective as a science producer. She pointed out that in news gathering there is always an interest in science because stories can be either good or bad. However, science reporting faces very specific challenges because the stories are not always very visual. In order to overcome these difficulties, the media needs scientists that are good communicators and that can talk not only about their research but also about its applicability in a clear, interesting and simple way.

The main issues that arose during the discussion were:

- The role of press office: Inaccuracies in science reporting do not always occur during the editing process and can sometimes be traced back to press releases that are not clear enough. It is vital that scientists work closely with their institution's press offices in order to make press releases as interesting and accurate as possible.
- Media training: Scientists should also be trained and prepared to talk about their research and its applications, especially if they are presenting at conferences and know that the media will be attending. Scientists should have encouragement and guidance from their press offices.
- Peer review: Is peer review necessary or desirable? Some felt that this was fundamental to make sure that news stories were accurate. However, others argued that peer review can be a very lengthy process and that it is not always desirable because a sense of immediacy is fundamental to news reporting. Some felt that relying too much in the process of peer review does not help to 'keep science in the real world' and that it makes it less interesting.
- Learning from the media: Sometimes scientists perceive that there is no real benefit in talking to the media. However, scientists should realise that they too can gain from communicating with the media and that their relationship is not just a one way process. The way their research is reported and the reaction of the public could make them think of their own work and its applications in a way that they had not previously thought of.