

A nano-scale problem?

The House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology has published a report¹ criticising the food industry for lack of transparency in its research into the uses of nanotechnology and nanomaterials.

Secrecy

'We observed... that the food industry... was very reluctant to talk about whether or not they were intending to develop products,' Lord Krebs, who chaired this inquiry of the committee, told *People & Science*.

Sue Davies, chief policy adviser of consumer group Which? gave evidence to the Select Committee. She told *People & Science*, 'We're quite excited about nanotechnology and we think it's going to have lots of benefits for consumers... but we're also concerned. [We need to] have a sensible meaningful debate and understand what the public would find useful. We need to know about the timescale for development and what's likely to happen when, but it's very difficult to find that out.'

¹ http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/lords_s_t_select/nanotechfood.cfm

Grey goo and benefits

Krebs expanded: 'The general feeling we got from the food industry was... a concern that those who mounted the campaign against GM will mount a campaign against the "grey goo", as the Prince of Wales called it, of nanotechnology. We felt very much that the food industry... should be promoting a wider dialogue.'

Julian Hunt, director of communications at the Food and Drink Federation, defended the industry. 'The criticism's probably a bit harsh,' he told *People & Science*. With GM there was hype and a lack of clarity of the benefits for consumers. [Industry] will start to talk about benefits only when they're clear what they're going to be and when they are ready to commercialize a product. Because we're not at that stage, there appears to be a deafening silence.'

Briefing documents available from Which? And the Food and Drink Federation:
<http://www.which.co.uk/about-which/what-we-do/which-policy/nanotechnology/index.jsp>
<http://www.fdf.org.uk/keyissues.aspx?issue=679>

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Open and engaged?

He continued, 'Manufacturers are trying to be as open and engaged on the debates about this technology as possible. Consumer groups are involved in a lot of stakeholder discussions at a European level, but it's not sexy or interesting enough to generate stories or commentary pieces in the media. They prefer to run stories about "grey goo". It's very difficult to counter that.'

Lord Krebs is not convinced: 'It's not a valid response to say this is three to five years away and we haven't got any sexy stories to tell, because the whole point is about having the debate early on. Because the food industry is not promoting a balanced dialogue, the communication space is occupied by the antis.'

Sticky problems

Marcus du Sautoy has given his inaugural lecture as Charles Simonyi Professor for Public Understanding of Science, nearly a year after his appointment. In it, he argued that mathematics is 'a glue binding... different scientific and artistic cultures together' and that his role is to be 'an ambassador for the often alien world of science.'

Broadcast Yourscience

The Planet-SciCast collection of the public's own short films about science has launched its 2010 competition. Films must last under three-and-a-half minutes and can be of experiments, demonstrations, or show science, technology, engineering and maths knowledge or skills being used at work. The competition closes on 16 April 2010. www.planet-sciacast.com/competition.cfm

You're just talking to yourselves!

Scientists are talking, but mostly to each other, researchers Julie Suleski and Motomu Ibaraki of Ohio State University have concluded. Their quantitative analysis showed that, in 1990, only 66 out of 508,795 papers (0.013 per cent) from peer-reviewed journals received coverage in *Time* magazine and television news programme NBC News, while in 2001 only 55 out of 649,795 papers (0.034 per cent) were covered. The vast majority of reporting was of health-related research.

STFC funding

The Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) has announced it will maintain its annual Science in Society funding at its current level of £1.6 million, despite cuts to many of its research programmes for 2010-11 and beyond, announced as part of its science prioritisation exercise. The government has announced the education and science budgets will shrink by £600 million in 2011-13.

Patient engagement

Greater public involvement has made a beneficial impact on health research, according to a new report, but it can be hard to measure.

Impacts on research

Involvement makes a difference to health research, its outcomes and stakeholders, a recent report has revealed. 'Some of those are very easily measured,' report author Kristina Staley of Twocan Associates told *People & Science*. 'For instance... a 40 per cent recruitment rate [of patients to a research project] that went up to 70 per cent after you changed things after input from people that are likely to participate. But there are lots of things that change that are much more qualitative in nature, and that's much harder to measure.'

Staley's report was for INVOLVE, a national advisory group that promotes and supports greater public involvement in NHS, public health and social care research.¹

Measuring

Measurement is a problem. Emily Fennell of Involve, a different organisation of not-for-profit public participation specialists, also examined how public and patient engagement (PPE) and public confidence in the NHS are

measured.² She told *People & Science*, '[Current measurement] instruments... are pretty ineffectual when you take into account the variety of organisations working in the health field and the different types of engagement going on. Because you can't make the link between engagement and clinical improvements, it's hard to promote engagement to clinicians and management staff [and] there's constant change not just in structures but also in NHS policies and priorities.'

Embedding

But although measurement is difficult, PPE is spreading. Joan Walsh, policy research and campaign manager at the Picker Institute, a not-for-profit organisation that aims to make patients' views count in healthcare, conducted a survey of primary care trusts to explore whether the Department of Health's resolve to improve PPE was having an effect.³ 'We found that [it] had really gone up the agenda in two different ways. Executive responsibility for PPE had gone upwards towards chief executive...

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[or] director level. The other shift we noticed was that PPE was now seen as everyone's job, not just the PPE lead's job.'

Necessary?

Kristina Staley was adamant that there's no one simple measure for all forms of public engagement, in all contexts. 'Every study is different. A clinical trial is very, very different from a public health intervention to prevent teenage pregnancy. There's this kind of Holy Grail – we've got to find a robust measure... [appropriate] in every example – and maybe you just can't,' she said.

1 www.invo.org.uk/pdfs/Involve_Exploring_Impactfinal28.10.09.pdf
[Http://www.invo.org.uk/pdfs/Involve_ExploringImpactSummary3.11.09final.pdf](http://www.invo.org.uk/pdfs/Involve_ExploringImpactSummary3.11.09final.pdf)

2 <http://www.involve.org.uk/engaging-with-impact/>

3 http://www.pickereurope.org/Filestore/PIE_reports/project_reports/PCT_Commissioning_Survey_2009_FINAL_TO_LYNX_with_cover.pdf



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Complaints department

Last September, Science Minister Lord Drayson asked scientists who had been misrepresented in the media to contact him. 'Since my offer to scientists none has contacted me...' he told *People & Science*. However, he has met with the Press Complaints Commission to discuss their role in resolving cases 'where coverage falls short...'

Power in engagement

Upstream engagement needs an understanding of the political and power aspects of deliberative processes, as well as their ethical, legal and social aspects, says a recent EU report. *Challenging futures of science in society* is a report from the Monitoring Activities of Science in Society in Europe (MASIS) expert group.
See <http://tinyurl.com/ybh2hj6>

Nano me

The Responsible Nano Forum has produced a website for anyone who wants to know more about nanotechnology. It wants www.nanoandme.org to be the hub of debate about nano-related issues, particularly the social and ethical concerns which arise from some of its uses. The Forum is funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

Consultation on the Research Excellence Framework

The Higher Education Funding Council for England is piloting ways of measuring 'impact' for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) which replaces the Research Assessment Exercise. The REF will reward units where researchers build on excellent research to deliver demonstrable benefits to the economy, society, public policy, culture and quality of life. The pilots will end in the summer.
www.hefce.ac.uk/ref