



## Dying to help

Academics should be advocates too, argues **Robert Walgate**

What's more important? Academic respectability and caution, or the lives of millions whom you might be able to help? Suppose there's a major health problem in developing countries, to which you believe you've found a fundamental solution. Should you publish only in academic journals refereed by your competitive peers? Or should you also try to influence the world and save lives?

Villagers in Burkina Faso, in west – central Africa, know their answer. They've been laughing and crying at theatrical performances written by researchers, and played by comedians, on saving pregnant mothers facing difficult childbirths. The plays were the inspired result of the Immpact research programme (the Initiative for maternal mortality programme assessment), which has been seeking means to reduce the staggering maternal mortality in developing countries.

Mothers die in and around childbirth at a rate some 175-fold higher in poor countries than they do in the rich world. Puerperal sepsis, an overwhelming bacterial infection of the blood mostly acquired at delivery, and many other complications of giving birth, can be fatal – unless emergency care is both available and affordable by mothers.

Immpact is based at Aberdeen University, where the programme's Director, Professor Wendy Graham, told *People & Science*, 'We want universal awareness of Immpact's key finding: that the poorest women must have access to emergency care.'

Immpact's studies in Indonesia, Ghana, and Burkina Faso – supported primarily by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the UK Department of International Development (DFID) and USAID – demonstrated this clearly. But how should the programme communicate their results to those who needed to know, and potentially could take action? The

play was one example – a pilot study – for how that could be done at the level of communities.

But there's also the world of political commitment and funding to address. So Graham is engaging at the highest level, with leaders at G20 and G8, through UN agencies, the White Ribbon Alliance, and through the High-Level Leadership Group on Maternal Mortality, of which Bience Gawanas (Commissioner for Social Affairs of the African Union) and Sarah Brown (wife of the British Prime Minister) are the co-chairs.

For this group, Graham and her colleagues have been producing hard-hitting, two-page briefing documents aimed directly at individual countries attending G20 and G8. Much discussion goes on behind the scenes at these meetings, out of the sight of the media, among leaders and first ladies at dinners and other social occasions, and 'having the right arguments and information in these situations is crucial to winning hearts and changing minds', Graham told *People & Science*.

Graham says it's become imperative that researchers enter the 'unfamiliar territory' of communications. 'We have to go there. We'll be dinosaurs if we don't. Some colleagues doubt whether it's our role – because we have so many other things to do, and because we are not skilled in this. So for those of us treading this path at the moment, it's a lonely path.'

'There's a real tension between academic credibility and advocacy,' said Sue Fairburn, Immpact Knowledge and Advocacy Manager, and one of the co-applicants for the next stage of communication activities in Burkina. 'We must find the balance between the two.'

My own view is that there's even an academic benefit to communication in these life-changing subjects. If subsequent actions and consequences are measured, they will add to understanding, and help refine practical interventions.

But the fundamental conclusion is moral. Where communication is life or death, communicate! Or pass by, on the other side of the road.

### Further reading:

Immpact: [www.immpact-international.org](http://www.immpact-international.org)

High-Level Leadership Group on Maternal Mortality: [www.who.int/pmnch/media/membernews/2009/20090312\\_mmlg/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/pmnch/media/membernews/2009/20090312_mmlg/en/index.html)

The White Ribbon Alliance: [www.whiteribbonalliance.org/](http://www.whiteribbonalliance.org/)



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# Tales from the water cooler

**Barrie Cadshaw** reveals what's been going on in the public engagement with science community

**Katherine Mathieson** has taken up the post of Director of Education at the British Science Association. She has formerly worked with the National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts, Science Line, the Forensic Science Service and the pharmaceutical industry.

**Laure Thomas**, acting Chief Press Officer at the Medical Research Council, has been appointed Chief Press Officer at the Department for Innovation Universities & Skills.

**Lisa Hendry**, Press Officer at the British Science Association, heads off to the Natural History Museum to support the Museum scientists in publishing their research online. Lisa is succeeded by **Ollie Christophers** in the renamed role of Communications Officer. Ollie is a post graduate from Cardiff University's School of Journalism. He joins the Association from UK PR agency Bell Pottinger where he worked on a diverse range of accounts including the NHS, Tesco, and Müller. Ollie was named one of PR Week's six 'New Grads in the City to Watch' for 2009.

## MOVERS... AND SHAKERS...

You may well have heard that the Beeb is due to have a special year of science broadcasting in 2010 to chime with the Royal Society's 350th anniversary. The BBC's specific plans for the time being are under wraps, but we have heard on the grapevine that Robert Winston may well be fronting BBC1's element of next year's campaign. Moving over to the other side, we hear that Channel 4 is planning a series on the history of British science. Presenters will include James Dyson, Jim Al-Khalili, Richard Dawkins and Paul Nurse.

Talking about the Royal Society, we have heard that it is going to be taking over London's Southbank In 2010 to stage a nine day science festival in the summer of 2010. The festival will build upon the Society's traditional Summer Science Exhibition and be delivered in partnership with the Southbank Centre. It will aim to explore ways to break down perceived barriers between the arts and sciences.

In the last issue of *People & Science* we announced that the UK's network of science and discovery centres, Ecsite-uk, had moved from London to Bristol. We can now report that Ecsite-uk has rebranded and is now calling itself The Association for Science and Discovery Centres. It believes that the new name will better reflect and communicate its role of supporting and networking the UK's wide range of science and discovery centres, science museums and other science-engagement related organisations.

The World Conference of Science Journalists is almost upon us. Word on the street is that an unnamed member of the UK government will defend the UK science media in a debate on standards of science reporting in the UK. The Sunday papers certainly seem to be feeling the credit crunch as a Sunday science journalist – who shall remain anonymous – claims they can't afford to attend the Conference. And finally, in a gesture of solidarity with colleagues, Miles O'Brien – formerly with CNN's axed science, technology and environment news unit – is being flown in for a session entitled 'Science Journalism in Crisis?'

Talking of crisis and the current economic downturn, the powers that be at the Association of British Science Writers have decreed that it is no longer possible to justify a paid member of staff administering the Association. As *People & Science* goes to print, we have learned the sad news that our colleague, ABSW Administrator Barbie Drillsma, will have to go.

### Finally...

Do get in touch if you hear any tales at the water cooler that you'd like us to include in the next edition of *People & Science*.



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