

Pressing matters: Putting public science on the agenda

During my early days as a medical reporter, I quickly learned the meaning of terms like P value, relative risk and nosocomial infection. I also soon discovered that there could be wildly different responses to the prospect of media attention.

During my years as a clinical writer I had drug company reps practically club me and drag me into their cave—or at least their corner of the press room. At the other extreme, I could find myself trying to drag answers from a lab-bound scientist who would clearly rather eat from a Petri dish than speak to a reporter.

In this age of fierce competition—for people, funds and prestige—there's no question that media attention can open doors, so why do public scientists hide behind them?

When conference organizers asked me take part in this panel, they said they wanted to open up discussion on strengthening the role of public science in society. At the time, a five-part series I'd written on Canada's drug safety system had just been published in the *Ottawa Citizen*. I guess they figured I'd know something about this topic, and I thought I did, too.

I've written hundreds of articles about important breakthroughs made by public scientists. It was only 7 a.m. in Victoria when we had our conference-call discussion, so it took me a minute to realize the organizers were talking about public scientists *outside* of academe.

Surely, I'd written some stories about what goes on in government labs? I vaguely recalled that when I'd tried to track down government scientists they usually weren't eager to talk. So, I started to consider, why aren't public scientists in the public eye? What are the obstacles, and how can we overcome them?

This talk will cover some practical ways to get working journalists interested in what you do and how to deal with them once you've gotten their attention.

First, what are the advantages of media attention?

Putting your research or program in the public eye can raise awareness, increase public participation, attract funders, grant givers and colleagues working in similar fields; and lend credence to fledgling programs and institutions. Imagine the benefit of having a one-page article, complete with photo, summarizing your research findings in a lively, readable manner. You could then hand a copy to anyone who didn't comprehend what you were doing—your boss, your funding agency, your kids.

The public is more interested in food and drug issues than ever, whether it is the safety of spinach or the side-effects of statins. You just have to reach them. The Conference Board of Canada recently reported that our country trails in innovation at an alarming 14th out of 17 industrialized countries. We also we have a dearth of graduates in the sciences. In short, we aren't keeping up. Boosting the profile of public science might help reverse these trends.

So there might be benefits, how can we get them interested?

Journalists and assigning editors look for a range of different factors when weighing news value. A few ingredients of a newsworthy story:

Conflict: Scientists fight disease. Patients lobby for access to new medications, and so on.

Images: Always consider image possibilities. The availability of a dramatic photo can make the difference between an item becoming a lead story or never running. Images can be a major consideration in publications with many hungry pages to fill and a meager photo budget.

Real world relevance: Scientific discoveries that could affect large numbers of people, or be crucial to a few, will command attention, even if the applicability might be years down the road. Ask how the story subject will affect real lives.

The Offbeat: Editors love quirky stories. At the medical newspaper where I worked, we ran articles about head injuries caused by flying golf balls, and the science behind James Bond's shaken, not stirred martini.

How to deal with journalists, once you've got their attention

Keep it simple: As a writer, if I'm struggling with a story, I try to summarize it in a couple of sentences. As an editor, I know if I'm stuck creating a headline it may be a sign that the story is troubled or unclear. Distill the idea down to its important parts, and introduce these elements first. Meat and potatoes news writing still follows the inverted pyramid: most important news at the top.

Avoid jargon: When drafting press releases, backgrounders and giving interviews, keep it as clear as possible. Use plain language, without oversimplifying. Science journalists may have relevant academic backgrounds. They may simply be trained to ask the right people the right questions, as I was. Members of your team who have teaching experience may be good at walking journalists through complex findings or concepts.

Give them time: Journalists know you're busy and that speaking with them is in addition to your regular duties, but cutting an interview short is not in the interest of accuracy. Offering to be available for fact-checking is a nice touch. Journalists want the story to be accurate. We realize that when your name appears in print, your reputation is on the line. Ours is too.

Designate media contacts: And if they're out of reach, have an alternate. Deadlines are real, and courting media attention means being ready to lob the ball back when they call. If researchers are resistant to the press and won't return calls, don't put them as sources on media releases. It wastes everyone's time.

Ask who you want to reach, and what you want to accomplish: As a freelance writer, I consider where I want to sell a story and then tailor content and language to suit their readers. For example, I can write a story about the latest in prenatal screening for perinatologists, or I can write it for an expectant mother who's reading on her bus ride to work. Remember, the media aren't necessarily out to help you, but they aren't out to get you either. They just want a good story.

So why isn't public science in the public eye?

There are some obvious factors. Clearly, you don't have the resources of the private sector. You can't afford to pester reporters with endless phone calls or to send silly gimmicks. (I've seen medical reporters wooed with everything from bottled water bearing an antidepressant logo to herbal snacks for hot flashes.) But budget is not the only problem. Opening your arms to the media may require a culture change. As I said, when I've tried to pry information from government, it's been tough slogging.

In 2002, I spent months trying to get a status report from the Ontario health ministry on a \$3.7-million pilot project. Under the scheme, patients would receive a "bill" or statement at the end of a medical visit, showing services rendered and costs incurred to the public plan. The project was intended to promote accountability and assure patients their money was being spent wisely. It was introduced to much fanfare at a Toronto press conference.

About three months after the big announcement, I tried find how the millions were actually being spent. This simple request prompted a swarm of e-mails between ministry officials. It took me six weeks to receive any numbers. Then I asked for clarification, for example, would the program involve hiring new staff? The ministry delayed and dithered. They even pondered whether I needed to file a formal access-to-information request.

After more than two months, my basic questions about their accountability program were still unanswered. Accountability, indeed. It was absurd, but appears to be part of a climate of secrecy that pervades the public sector. Based on my experiences, there seems to be a knee-jerk instinct to deflect *all* questions, no matter how justified or sensible.

I won't prattle on about my experiences in trying to obtain information from Health Canada, an agency that has vowed to improve their transparency. When I was writing my series on Canada's drug safety system, it took me weeks, even months, to get responses to simple questions about facts and figures I found on *their own website*. Submitting access-to-information requests began to seem like lobbing bottles from a boat. Seasons came and went while I awaited their results.

There may have been no sinister motive for these long delays. Understaffing is probably partly to blame. Still, these examples are symptomatic of an approach that keeps the media out and deflects questions and debate. This, in turn, shuts the public out of public policy. The goal of my series of articles was to find real public policy options for strengthening our drug safety system. Health Canada and I should have had the same objectives.

In this age of information, transparency is a popular word for reports, if not the backbone of public institutions. In the case of food and drugs, opening the doors to the media could improve reporting of adverse drug reactions, raise awareness about safety issues, such as proper use of prescriptions or natural remedies. The list goes on. Putting public science on the news agenda may involve some growing pains, but it will be a healthy change for everyone.

— Jenny Manzer