

**Name:** Tom Whipple

**Job Title:** Science writer

**Organization:** The Times

**Is this input submitted as an organisational or individual response?** Individual

**Are you happy for your response to be published by the Academy?** Yes

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### **Roles and responsibilities**

#### **1. What can scientists do to ensure their work is communicated accurately? What can they do to help you report evidence?**

Make sure they are around and available on the day prior to publication/of publication (not a Tuesday afternoon a week later) to talk. Read through press releases and ask themselves honestly if they are a fair reflection. Understand stats - it's extraordinary how many scientists use odds ratios as if they are risk. If I pitch a story to my news editor on the basis of misleading stats in a press release, after I've read the paper I then have to go back and explain the story isn't as sold.

#### **2. What can press officers (including journal press officers, institutional press officers, and SMC press officers) do to ensure scientific work is communicated accurately? What could they do better?**

Make sure the scientists are around and able to talk. Attach links to the journal paper in emails - I can't think of a single good reason why the paper should not be there. Mention if the research is in animals/preliminary high up - if you don't, then a news agency will write it up leaving out the fact it's about autistic mice, my news editors will see the agency copy and demand a story on the basis of that or (worse) not even consult me and put it in. Then again, that may be a result!

#### **3. What is the role of journalists in communicating the benefits or harms of medicines? How does the pace of journalism affect this?**

We have to do so as accurately as we can, but we also often have to do so fast. This is why accurate press releases with links to the scientific papers are so important.

#### **4. How much responsibility should journalists take for accuracy of articles that originate from press-released research?**

Ultimately we should take all responsibility. An article should not be based on a press release.

#### **5. Are you supported in your efforts to communicate the context of evidence – are appropriate guidelines available?**

I'm not sure I fully understand this. There aren't any guidelines I know of, but the rules are obvious: don't get it wrong.

#### **6. What responsibility do journalists have to the public/patients who might base health decisions on how the media present evidence? What do you see as a journalist's responsibility when it comes to balancing the health needs of the individual verses those of the population?**

We need to present scientific results accurately. If those directly affect major health or patient decisions, or could be controversial (e.g. vaccines cause autism, new cancer cure) then it is also our responsibility to get outside comment.

### **Evaluating and reporting evidence**

#### **7. Are press releases clear enough about:**

- **whether something is an association or a causative relationship?**

- **whether a study is, for example, an observational study or a randomised control trial?**
- **whether the main result being reported was the finding related to the original hypothesis or an incidental finding?**

Sometimes they are, sometimes they aren't. But it's my job to work out which. Press officers have their own goals - such as getting coverage - and I appreciate that.

**8. If a press release emphasises limitations and caveats, are you more likely to also emphasise them in your articles?**

I honestly don't know...probably.

**9. Do you treat observational and epidemiological studies differently than randomised controlled trials?**

Yes

**10. Do you think preliminary research (e.g. work in cells, before animal or human trials) should always be publicised (e.g. via press release) by journals or institutions, and how likely are you to cover preliminary work?**

It's entirely their business whether they publicise it. I normally wouldn't write it up.

**11. Do you treat unpublished science being presented at conferences differently than science published in a peer-reviewed journal?**

**12. Do you treat opinion pieces and editorials published in journals differently than original research with new data that's published in the same journals?**

Yes

### The process of communicating evidence

**13. What do you think are the challenges of communicating evidence through the research → press release → media process? What would a better system look like?**

**14. How much do the public understand about the way science works (the process of research and publication; different types of studies; etc.), and does it matter if they don't? Do you think you have any role in educating the public in interpreting the quality of evidence?**

I don't have any role, beyond that of trying to explain a story as accessibly as possible - which may involve also talking about evidence quality.

**15. How important do you think absolute risk is when communicating risk? If the absolute risk was not given in the press release would you try and source the relevant information?**

Ideally we should report absolute risk.

**16. How do you judge someone's expertise?**

Decent university, PhD in relevant discipline !

**17. How much confidence do you have in the objectivity of single-issue research charities or campaign groups? And how does that compare to that of individual academics?**

Depends on the group. I trust CRUK etc, as I can't see what their conflict of interest would generally be. I'm less trustful, say, of Greenpeace.

**18. If two experts have opposing views, how do you decide how much space to give each of them?**

Not really relevant to the reporting I do. If I report a research paper and someone believes it's rubbish, I'll put their comment at the bottom and maybe flag it at the top too - unless they make a really compelling case its rubbish, in which case I won't report the study at all.