

Problems with media gatekeepers

It is easy to point fingers at science writers and scientists when newspaper accounts of research throw patients and stock markets into unjustified frenzy. But editors, too, share responsibility.

To paraphrase Tolstoy, every overblown media furore causes unhappiness in its own way. Last week's excitements following a story about cancer research in the *New York Times* (see page 104) provide excellent examples of the good, the bad and the ugly in and around science journalism. Many are blaming the writer, Gina Kolata, for the problems her story generated. But whatever her responsibilities, there are other participants in the process whose roles need to be considered.

An important antecedent of this story was a paper published last November by Thomas Boehm and colleagues (also reported in the *New York Times*) describing the regression of tumours in mice following the administration of endostatin (*Nature* 390, 404; 1997). It also reported complete regression of Lewis lung carcinomas following joint treatment with endostatin and angiostatin — both are powerful agents that directly inhibit the formation of new blood vessels that feed tumour growth. An accompanying News and Views article celebrated the arrival of the two agents. Said author Robert Kerbel: "the results could herald a new era of cancer treatment. But that era could be years away..." There followed several reasons for that caution (*Nature* 390 335; 1997), including the fact that experiments in mice are by no means necessarily a harbinger of success in humans.

Last week's story contained essentially no new science, being apparently stimulated more by scientists' enthusiasm. The account as a whole was, on the surface, appropriately guarded. The word "cautious" (or its synonyms) appeared in the main headline, in the second paragraph, in a prominent picture caption about the team's leader, Judah Folkman, and several times elsewhere. The science and the uncertainties were explained in considerable detail.

But there were signs that the writer and editors wished both to have their cautionary cake and to eat it. The opening paragraph stated

that patients might be taking the new treatment within a year but failed to make it clear that this could be only on a last-hope, highly experimental basis. The story was full of the buzz of excitement in the laboratory and, crucially for its impact, overenthusiastic endorsements from James Watson and from Richard Klausner, head of the National Cancer Institute, both of whom subsequently repudiated or 'clarified' the words attributed to them. The positioning of the article emphasized the editorial double-think: the caveats considerably reduced the significance of the story, but its location high on the front page reinforced the allure of scientists' hopeful enthusiasm and belied that substantial uncertainty.

The consequences — soaring stock values of a biotechnology company involved in the research and thousands of telephone calls from desperate cancer patients pleading for non-existent treatment — were certainly regrettable and even tragic, but where does the blame lie? Typically (and the *New York Times* is no exception) a newspaper's front-page stories are picked at a conference of section editors who each advocate their stories. Does a tendency to hype arise in such selling? Are journalists tempted to oversell their story to news editors to gain such prominence?

The *New York Times* is probably the most scientifically aware and responsible of all US newspapers, but this tale demonstrates how even there the process can go awry. More generally, it is the job of news editors to ensure the appropriate balance of excitement and caution in stories they run. They, as well as science journalists, need to be able to apply acute sensitivity to potential misinterpretation by readers. And they can help to avoid bad consequences of their craft by a better understanding of the damage so often done by naive or, worse, disingenuous reporting of distinguished scientists' unbridled expressions of anticipation. □

Mirage of *égalité* persists

Conservative resistance to the reform of higher education is alive and kicking in France.

The thirtieth anniversary this month of the May 1968 student uprising on the streets of Paris is a powerful reminder to France's politicians of the sensitivities alive in universities. Claude Allègre, the minister for higher education, research and technology, has ambitious plans for reform. Progress comes with a report on the higher education system, commissioned by Allègre from an expert panel which, *inter alia*, proposes knocking the élitist and anachronistic *grandes écoles* off the pedestal where they have been for too long (see page 102). Its proposals for modernizing course structure in universities to reduce the huge student drop-out rate are also welcome.

Regrettably, the slim 46-page report fails to tackle seriously the central issue of how to give the universities greater independence from central government. One major obstacle is France's devotion to the mirage of an egalitarian university system, supposedly (but actually far from) uniform in quality, offering national degrees, and for-

bidden from selecting students on the grounds of ability.

The report is clearly only one element in the debate. Predictably, the notoriously conservative trade unions complain of a lack of consultation by the report's authors and the ministry. A more open and competitive university system would bring benefits to all, but the strong attachment of many French to a national system cannot be wished away by decree. The unions' ominous warning of "an *n*th reform imposed from above is doomed to failure" looks all too apt. In his year in office, Allègre has demonstrated an unenviable talent for rallying his opponents, and has often given the impression of abhorring genuine consultation. This may be a tactic intended to gain a strong starting position in negotiations. But if the government is to succeed in its admirable goal of modernizing French universities, it will at some point need to engage in a more subtle and well structured strategy for building a new consensus. □