

French ethics panel warns of 'crisis' in science reporting

Paris. The reporting of biomedical issues by the media is "a crisis in the making" according to the French national bioethics committee, which last week submitted to the government a statement on the publication of biological and medical information.

The committee says reporting on such issues has become an important social, cultural, economic, political and civic issue. It claims that an "ethical threshold" has now been crossed with the increased occurrence of "rash announcements, retention of information, self-interested connivances, attempts at manipulation of decision-makers, and impenitent spreading of false ideas".

The rapporteurs of the statement — Henri Atlan, professor of biophysics at the faculty of Broussais Hôtel-Dieu in Paris, and the philosopher Lucien Seve — challenge, for example, the coverage given to controversial claims by a French research group that freezing embryos affects their subsequent development, and that the safety of artificial reproductive technologies in humans may have to be reassessed (see *Nature* 373, 553; 1995).

The statement is an extensively revised version of a report on the topic published by the committee last year. In particular, this recommended the appointment of an ombudsman to regulate scientific reporting, warning that if journalists did not address the problems themselves, "the legislator or the government risked imposing measures that would not be very pleasant."

This initial report was vigorously opposed by much of the press and many scientists, who considered it a thinly-veiled attempt to restrict press freedom. The committee has subsequently held discussions with journalists, and taken into account issues raised at a conference organized earlier this year by the French association of science journalists.

The statement still retains the idea of appointing an ombudsman of some sort. But it recommends that he or she should have no legal powers, merely attempting to find solutions to particular problems.

The statement otherwise restates much of the earlier report. Much of the blame, it argues, lies with the media's "obsession with audience figures", its search for "scoops" and its preoccupation with "the sensational and emotional". Medical reporting is criticized as being "too often" a cover for advertising.

But the scientific community also comes under fire. The committee criticizes 'publication by press conference', reiterating that news reports should be based on results that have been published in a peer-reviewed journal. Worldwide media coverage was given, for example, to claims by researchers

at the Pasteur Institute in Paris to have identified the 'door' through which HIV infects cells, whereas the results had not yet been published and indeed were later contested by other groups (see *Nature* 366, 6; 1993).

"Publish or perish" is part of the problem, according to the committee, recommending that research organizations reconsider the means by which they evaluate researchers. Similarly, the committee attacks what it describes as "connivance" between some researchers and journalists, one benefitting from the "scoop" and the other from coverage, and calls for journalists to be given equal access to information.

In this context, the committee criticises *Nature* and other "high-level" journals for "beginning to be affected by the logic of communication", claiming in particular that



by distributing summaries of their articles several days before an issue is published, such journals allow promotional considerations to influence editorial policy.

The committee also draws attention to the risks of disinformation in advertising campaigns run by medical charities, where the need to raise funds may override a desire for accuracy. In particular, the committee says charities should be vigilant not to create false hopes as to when new therapies will become available. Similarly, the statement warns that the growing financial interests in biology and medicine risk compromising the accuracy of information.

But the committee's basic assertion that scientific reporting is deteriorating has still been sharply contested. Speaking at a meeting earlier this year, Philippe Lazar, director general of the national biomedical research organization INSERM, argued, for example, that the quality of reporting is in fact improving, taking into account the "explosion" in both the quantity and complexity of scientific information.

Declan Butler

India's R&D agency is directed to get down to business

New Delhi. 'Making money' is to be the motto of India's leading research agency under its new director-general, Ragunath Mashelkar. The 52-year-old chemical engineer, who took over the reins of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) last week, says his goal is to make the council's laboratories self-financing "by doing research like business".

The council employs nearly 7,000 scientists in about 40 laboratories specializing in areas that range from drugs and pesticides to petroleum and leather. Research will in future be "market-driven and performance-orientated", with priority given to that which can be patented, says Mashelkar, the youngest scientist to head the CSIR.

Basic research will be supported only if it is novel or related to industry's needs. He promises that CSIR's laboratories will be infused with commercial culture — and will also be given greater autonomy.

Under the new policies, laboratories will be expected to follow a fast track of innovative rather than imitative research, attracting more money from Indian companies and projecting CSIR as what Mashelkar calls "a platform for global industrial research and development". He claims that, if successful, CSIR could become a globally competitive R&D organization comparable to the TNO in the Netherlands.

As part of a general strategy to project a corporate image, each laboratory will set up a "commercial arm" staffed by 10 to 15 marketing professionals. CSIR scientists, meanwhile, will be appointed to the boards of private companies to help them acquire "business sense".

Two of CSIR's chemical laboratories will be restructured along commercial lines, with the expectation that others will follow suit. The agency will also develop a 'blueprint' for attracting expatriate Indian scientists to its laboratories, as well as spearheading a national mission for educating scientists on patents and intellectual property rights.

A new incentive scheme has also been announced, under which scientists developing marketable inventions will be paid 40 per cent of any royalties subsequently received by CSIR. Staff will be encouraged to set up companies to exploit their inventions, and the upper limit — currently \$3,300 — on the amount they can earn through private consultancy work has been abolished.

Through such measures, Mashelkar says he expects the CSIR laboratories to earn at least half their annual budgets through the development and sale of new technologies. At present, their joint earnings are \$50 million — one third of the total budget.

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