COMMENTARY/

RES MEDIA

by Bernard Dixon

You've raised the working capital, found your field site in what estate agents call a desirable location, and built a stunning suite of labs and offices. You've recruited an eager team of young Ph.D.s and told the world about the new company through a handsome prospectus in a nice shade of green. Today sees the launch of your high-flying operations. Everyone seems happy and buoyant. You are rather pleased with yourself.

What, then, is the last thing you need as the time for morning coffee approaches and as the sun, modulated by a pleasant line of willow trees, filters through your office windows? The likely answer is a call from an investigative journalist. Perceptive questions about your research competence and financial standing could easily put you into a rotten mood for the rest of the week. What's the point, anyway? Better to plead work pressure, and talk instead to that friendly reporter you met at last year's congress. Give him an exclusive, and he will behave exactly as you *expect* a reporter to behave, recounting your words faithfully and prominently—and coming back for more at just the right time.

The case for a critical approach by the media seldom appeals to those who are, or feel themselves to be, on the receiving end of skeptical interrogations. I was reminded of this during an excellent workshop organised by the U.S.-E.C. Task Force on Biotechnology Research and held last month in Dublin, Ireland. The event was co-chaired by Alvin Young, Director of the Office of Agricultural Biotechnology of the U.S. Department of Agriculture; Mark Cantley, Head of the European Commission's Concertation Unit for Biotechnology; and Barry McSweeney, Director of BioResearch Ireland. As the proceedings will show when they emerge from the complexities of paper ferrying later this year, the workshop provided a valuable occasion for extended deliberations between disparate sectors of the biotechnology business. The part played by Irish whiskey in the proceedings was small, though highly significant ($p < 0.001$, compared with control).

There was more than one point during the Dublin meeting when participants expressed strong misgivings over the idea that a responsible press means a critical press. The foundations of those reservations range widely—from the innocent view that journalists are simply not equipped to question the arcane deliberations of busy scientists, to resentment that peddlers of sensationalism have any right whatsoever to query austere, objective truth. But there was no doubt about the depth of underlying opposition.

There is only one way, though a totally winning way, to counter such opposition. This is to ask whether the enemies of critical journalism would welcome *uncritical* journalists buying, hook, line and sinker, and then retailing without question, stories provided by *other* scientists and companies—especially the claims of competitors. The answer, of course, is no. Whether in scientific or political journalism,

we all benefit when the media are active rather than passive in their handling of information.

Consider the following examples—three contrasting episodes, but each sufficiently distant in time to allow valid conclusions to be drawn:

• *November 1967.* The medical correspondent of *The Observer* newspaper revealed that plans were being made at the National Heart Hospital in London for what was due to be the world's first heart transplant. The hospital issued a categorical denial. One month later, Dr. Christiaan Barnard initiated cardiac transplantation at the Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, South Africa. London followed suit in April 1968. *The Observer* had been entirely correct in its earlier report.

• *April 1974.* Barbara Yunker, medical reporter for *The New York Post*, learned that a scandal was brewing at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Institute. It transpired that William Summerlin had touched up experimental mice with a felt-tip pen, making them appear to have accepted skin grafts from unrelated mice. Many previous press reports of Summerlin's apparently revolutionary work had been ecstatic; only a few had reflected the science-based doubts of other researchers in the field.

• *August 1982.* *The Guardian* carried a story headlined "Sober Study Shatters Drunken Scotsman Myth," based on University of Glasgow research showing lower *per capita* alcohol consumption in Scotland than elsewhere in the British Isles. The next day, the headline and story had to be corrected by a further piece confirming that figures for alcohol-related crime and hospital admissions for alcoholism were all higher in Scotland. Average figures are notoriously misleading for comparisons of this sort.

The conclusion is unambiguous. While distortion and inaccuracy can never be justified, critical journalism is in the public interest. No cause, save the very short-term interests of a provider of information, is served by the mindless retailing of claims and handouts, however impressive the source from which they come. Information given to the media—whether it is honest and reliable, or based on simple untruths (the National Heart Hospital), logical fallacies (the non-drunken Scots), or heterodox findings that merit intensive scrutiny (William Summerlin's work)—is there to be challenged. Suspicion and sometimes cynicism are essential tools for the working journalist.

Some years ago, no less a figure than the British government's Chief Scientific Advisor, Lord Zuckerman, wrote that science writers "are essentially reporters, any two of whom could be expected . . . to give essentially the same picture of the printed words of some scientific or technical publication about which they might be writing, however different their views might be about the significance of the facts . . . one does not expect them to behave like art critics, who might take differing views of the quality of a new exhibition of paintings or sculpture."

He was wrong, wasn't he?

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