

Improving communication between scientists and the press

Scientific journalism was the subject of attention on both sides of the Atlantic last month. While the British media reported non-existent rows between UK scientists and the government, a Harvard University committee published guidelines to improve science-media communication in the US.

Stories by British journalists that an advisory panel of scientists was at loggerheads with the government over the delayed publication of a cancer report were simply "not true," says Stanley Venitt, a member of the Committee on the Medical Aspects (COMA) of Food and Nutrition Policy which generated the document in question.

According to newspaper articles, the government is stalling publication of the document because it contradicts government advice on the consumption of red meat. But, as Venitt explained to *Nature Medicine*, "there is no row, simply a request that the report be published so that we can discuss the findings."

Venitt believes that the media manufactured the idea of a dispute to hype-up the story and attract readers in much the same way that it did with preliminary observations released from the report in a government statement last September. At that time, the government issued a press release that highlighted certain recommendations from the "Nutritional Aspects of the Development of Cancer" document. These included the need to maintain a healthy and steady body weight throughout adult life and increase dietary fiber intake from fruits and vegetables. The consumption of red and processed meat was also mentioned: people with intake at or above the national average of 90g/day should consider a reduction, while those with high intake of around 140g/day—the upper end of the scale in the UK—should reduce their consumption.

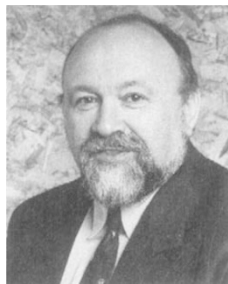
Although the communication stressed the need to follow "these recommendations in the context of COMA's wider recommendations for a balanced diet," the press seized on the quantities of red meat and their relationship to cancer. "Every journalist I spoke to was obsessed by these figures," complains Venitt, "the 140 value is very trivial compared with

the main message of the report. The point I'm making is that only when it is published—which I hope is immediately—can we discuss what gram value is important. We can not discuss it rationally until that time."

Although the British have good reason to be pre-occupied with red meat given the current BSE climate, complaints about media interpretation of scientific research results—especially pertaining to nutrition and health—is not restricted to

the UK. A 19-member committee from the Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, viewed the matter of "public representation of scientific studies on nutrition" to be so serious as to warrant the publication of guidelines for scientists and journalists on how to improve communication.

The guidelines were considered meritorious enough to be printed in an established scientific journal (*Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, February 4th). Furthermore, eight roundtable discussions were held involving more than 60 experts to produce the rules, which offer a checklist for evaluating a news story of scientific report: Does the communication enhance public understanding of diet and health? is the study credible enough to warrant attention? has an over-simplistic approach been taken and nuances ignored? is an idea presented out of context?



Stanley Venitt

Harvey Fineberg, co-convenor of the Harvard committee and provost of Harvard University, says the problem lies not in the absence of information, but in the surfeit that reaches the public. "It is especially problematic that individual studies are reported without adequate context of where they sit in the knowledge on a given area," Fineberg told *Nature Medicine*. He points out that scientific information related to other medical issues is acted upon with the involvement of a clinician as a matter of course. "In nutrition, it's left entirely up to the individual how to respond, so there's a higher burden on public communication in this area," says Fineberg.

The British media will have the chance to redeem themselves when the COMA report is eventually released. But the



Harvey Fineberg

blame may not be entirely theirs to take. The Harvard guidelines also include advice for scientists on how to present information and ideas clearly to the press. Ambiguous messages could be

part of the problem in the UK, since February's government Green Paper, "Our Healthier Nation," does not contain a single dietary recommendation. It now seems that the UK government does not believe in telling people what to eat.

KAREN BIRMINGHAM, NEW YORK

Clinical trials of cancer therapy creates tension in Italian biomedical community

Bowing to what many view as media and public pressure, Italy's Minister of Health Rosy Bindi has approved clinical trials of a controversial cancer treatment. However, the decision to fully fund national studies of the therapy, at an estimated cost of \$20–25 million, in times of severe health budget restraints and the government's apparent disregard for scientific reasoning on the matter, has sparked an unprecedented row within the Italian medical and scientific communities.

The treatment, invented by 85 year old physician and retired physiology professor Luigi Di Bella, comprises a cocktail of hor-

mones and vitamins including somatostatin and its analog, octreotide, which is already launched by Novartis for acromegaly and metastatic carcinoid syndrome. Recent revelations that the mixture also contains small quantities of the anti-cancer drug, cyclofosamide, has prompted angry comments from some scientists: "It is a shame that some members of the National Committee of Oncology try to justify a trial, the outcome of which might be related to an already well established [drug]," says Alberto Mantovani an immunologist at Brescia University.

Claims by Di Bella that the potion has