

Science and the Public Interest - A Report by the Royal Society

Many of the biggest controversies in science over the past few years have arisen at least partly from problems in the process of communicating research results to the public. What follows has been taken directly from the report summary.

Although the number of problems has been relatively small compared to the overall output of research, they nevertheless can potentially affect tens if not hundreds of millions of people worldwide. Although most problems appear in fields directly relating to human health, they have occurred in a wide range of other areas as well.

In response to these controversies, the Royal Society established a small working group to consider whether improvements could be made in the way that researchers communicate their results to the public. This report, which has been endorsed by the Council of the Royal Society, presents the conclusions of the working group.

The main thrust is that researchers need to think deliberately about whether and how to communicate their results to the public and that, in this, a prime consideration should be how the public interest is best served. The report is designed to help researchers whose imminent publications might merit broader communication.

Using the UK Freedom of Information Act (2002) as a

guide, the public interest is served where the communication of research results would:

- further the public's understanding of, and participation in, the debate of issues of the day;
- facilitate accountability and transparency of researchers, their funders and their employers;
- allow individuals to understand how the results of research affect their lives and, in some cases, assist individuals in making informed decisions in light of the results; and
- bring to light information affecting public well-being and safety.

Research results can have implications for the public in terms of matters such as eating habits, life-style, patient welfare, personal security and well-being, the state of human society and the state of the environment.

The likely impact of research results on the public needs to be carefully assessed by the research community.

The public interest is involved not only in publicly

funded research but also when funds come from private or commercial sources, thereby raising issues of corporate social responsibility.

Factors such as national security, commercial confidentiality and intellectual property rights are recognised as major interests that can compete with the public interest. These can apply in cases such as research carried out by companies, or research carried out under contract from the private sector, or research carried out by universities that wish to protect and exploit intellectual property rights.

The information provided by the Department for Trade and Industry on business-university collaborations is a source of guidance on resolving potential conflicts.

In this context the research community has two main responsibilities.

The first is to attempt an accurate assessment of the potential implications for the public.

The second is to ensure the timely and appropriate communication to the public of results if such

Science and the Public Interest - A Report by the Royal Society cont.

communication is in the public interest.

These twin responsibilities should be embedded within the culture of the research community as a whole, and all practices should take them into account and respect them.

Many journals are wary, for good reasons, about revealing the identity of referees involved in peer review. Some critics argue, however, that public confidence in the integrity of the process might be improved if referees allowed their names to be revealed. A debate is needed about lifting the cloak of anonymity when an article has been accepted for publication and has public interest implications.

Other changes in journal operation and practice, such as the publication of papers on the world wide web before the completion of peer review, need to be considered in terms of the implications for the public. Similarly, great care is needed when results are communicated to the public, for instance via the media alongside a conference presentation, before they have been subjected to independent review.

Lay summaries, carefully prepared by collaboration

between researchers and professional journals, could serve an important function when communicating to the public. Researchers should be encouraged to acquire the skills needed for such communication.

Calls have been made for the establishment of an independent body to watch over the release or suppression of new findings to the public.

Formation of such a body, even if it took the form of self-regulation, is not likely to be popular in the research community. In the preferred absence of regulation, every effort should be made to ensure that high quality research of public interest is communicated to the public and that the importance of doing so is widely understood in the research community.

The report includes a checklist in Annex 1 of questions to help researchers plan for the effective communication of research results to the public where it is appropriate for them to do so.

The full report is available at: www.royalsoc.ac.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=2879

Early Years Foundation Stage Consultation

This document, published on 5th May, invites comments on a draft of the "Early Years Foundation Stage" (EYFS), which is due to come into force in September 2008.

Following the publication of Every Child Matters the Government introduced its 10 year strategy for childcare. The Childcare Bill takes forward the legislative commitments made in the 10 year strategy

The EYFS will be compulsory for all early years' providers that have to register with Ofsted, as well as independent, maintained and non-maintained special schools with provision for children from the age of 3 to the end of the academic year in which they turn 5.

It will build on the existing "Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage", the "Birth to Three Matters" framework, and the *National Standards for Under 8s Day Care and Childminding*.

The framework aims to deliver improved outcomes for all children, across every area of learning and development.

Responses to the consultation by 28th July. All documents can be accessed at: www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/conDetails.cfm?consultationId=1393