Editors' view

Medicines and the media

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'In the life of every successful physician there comes the temptation to toy with the Delilah of the Press – daily and otherwise. There are times when she may be courted with satisfaction, but beware! Sooner or later she is sure to play the harlot and has left many a man shorn of his strength, namely the confidence of his professional brethren.'

William Osler

'Every doctor should now be willing to collaborate with the media today in public education about what medicine has to offer in prevention and cause of disease.'

Charles Fletcher

Reuters Press Agency (no apostrophe, cf *Finnegans Wake* and *Howards End*) was founded in 1851 by Paul Julius Reuter, to take advantage of the international marketability of news, using as many means of communication as he could, including the recently invented telegraph, horses, and even pigeons [1]. Reuters, Agence France Presse, and Associated Press now purvey in excess of 90% of all foreign news printed by the world's newspapers.

In the 1980s Neville Maxwell, an academic journalist, one-time India correspondent of *The Times*, started to invite overseas journalists to take part in a development programme at Oxford University's International Development Centre in Queen Elizabeth House and persuaded Reuters to fund a few places. When he retired in 1992 he asked Green College in Oxford to house the programme, which is now funded partly by Reuters and partly from other sources. Its two directors have both been eminent journalists, first Godfrey Hodgson, previously foreign correspondent of *The Observer* in Wash-

ington and foreign editor of *The Independent*, well known for his penetrating disquisitions on American politics, and now Paddy Coulter, a development journalist and one-time Head of Communications at Oxfam and Director of the International Broadcasting Trust. At any time the programme hosts about a dozen journalists, including medical, business, political, and environmental correspondents, in mid-career. Most of them stay for an academic term, some for two terms, a few for a whole year. They come from both print and broadcast media all over the world, and competition to be admitted is fierce. The programme allows them to escape the daily grind of deadlines, and they spend most of their time researching a single topic in depth, advised by an expert in the University. They write a dissertation, and some even produce a scholarly book. Each presents a seminar to their colleagues, and once a week they enjoy an in-house seminar given by a guest lecturer, under 'Chatham House rules', inexact though that label is [2]. Lecturers over the years have included such as Senator Gary Hart, Max Hastings, Jeremy Paxman, and Jon Snow. There is no comparable programme elsewhere in the world outside of the USA.

I am privileged to have been a member of the Board of Management of the Reuters Journalist Fellowship Programme since its association with Green College began. The effort involved is minimal and the rewards enormous. Most of all, I have been impressed by the exceptional quality of the journalists, their attention to detail, and their determination not to dumb down important issues or, as often happens [3], to distort the balance.

It is with great interest, therefore, that I note two papers that appear in this issue of the *Journal*. The first shows how much influence media analysis can have on drug

prescribing [4]. Following warnings by the Food and Drug Administration in the USA of severe withdrawal symptoms associated with paroxetine, the UK current-affairs programme Panorama, which has a long pedigree of highlighting adverse effects of drugs, broadcast its analyses in October 2002, May 2003, and October 2004. During this time the prescribing of paroxetine steadily fell, while the prescribing of other SSRIs rose. Of course, other influences must have contributed to these changes, but in the weeks after each programme there were also striking increases in the reporting of suspected adverse reactions to paroxetine on yellow cards in the UK. When a review of the effects of SSRIs on the risk of suicidal behaviour in children was publicized in the media in December 2003, the rate of increased prescribing of SSRIs other than paroxetine also abated.

In another paper in this issue of the *Journal* Waller et al. highlight problems that can arise as a result of media coverage of drug safety issues; they propose that professionals should rethink their strategies for dealing with the media [5].

Many scientists and doctors complain that they have on occasion been misrepresented by the media and are wary of giving interviews. In contrast, my experience with a wide range of journalists over the years has been generally positive, perhaps because I have attended courses on dealing with the media and have learned to avoid saying what journalists may want me to say. I have given more interviews than have been broadcast or reported; some journalists have clearly not found the material that I was willing to give them useful – perhaps it was not sensational enough. On other occasions I have refused to give an interview, because I thought that it was inappropriate. But when an interview has been broadcast I have always felt that what I wanted to say had been fairly communicated. On one occasion, for example, I was contacted by Central News at 11 AM and met the journalist and his crew at 3 PM. It took us 15 minutes to discuss the appropriate questions and answers while the equipment was set up, and another 5 minutes for the interview itself. Oxfam had imported necklaces from Africa made out of gaily coloured beads, which turned out to be the seeds of a highly poisonous plant. When they discovered the danger, they withdrew the necklaces from sale and wanted to warn anyone who had bought one to dispose of it and on no account let it get into the hands of a child. The one-minute news item, concocted from archival footage and extracts from the interview, topped and tailed by the anchor, was broadcast on the 6 o'clock bulletin and then again on News at Ten. There was insufficient time for me to approve the item factually in advance, but I trusted the journalists

to get the important message over clearly and succinctly. Thanks to their high professionalism, they did.

Communication of this sort is of the utmost importance, whatever news about medicines we want to disseminate, and we should all learn how to do it effectively and how to recognize established respected professionals. The British Pharmacological Society and this *Journal* are playing their parts. The Society has recently organized a media training day for its officers, and the *Journal* has started to issue press releases to publicize research that we publish. For their part, authors have been very helpful in preparing accurate accounts of their results. Papers that have featured so far have been about how the publication of the Million Women Study affected the prescribing of hormone replacement therapy [6] and the adverse effects of thiazide diuretics [7]. The results of Martin et al. in this issue [4] will surely also be of interest to the press.

The two contrasting quotations at the head of this piece remind us that there are potential benefits and harms in dealing with the media. But if we don't all participate in the process, those who are willing to do so may vitiate, subvert, or distort the message that we would otherwise want to give. We should certainly not shrink from interviews from fear of being misrepresented. We should rather learn how to get the media to represent us accurately. Anne Karpf's book *Doctoring the Media* shows how it has been done in the past [8].

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