Swimming with sharks: delivering the occupational health message

Over the last 3 years, *Occupational Medicine* has prepared press releases for a small selection of the scientific articles we have published. The rationale for this has been to raise the profile of the journal, the Society of Occupational Medicine and occupational health in general. One of the aims of the Society is to prevent the occurrence of occupational disease and injury across the whole of industry and raising the profile of occupational health and delivering the message about what occupational physicians do and can do, will help it meet that aim. This is particularly important for a speciality such as ours which is not in mainstream medicine and which is poorly understood even by other health professionals. It is also important in the wider context of promoting the benefits of work and providing accurate information about what causes work-related ill health.

Where the media finds a story of interest, the effect can be sudden and extensive. The Society will receive multiple requests for interviews and quotes and even for appearances on television and radio within a very short period of time. During the course of 2–3 days, a media storm blows, often with an aftershock with requests from different parts of the globe and after that the story ripples out among the smaller regional and local papers before cropping up in weekly and monthly publications and in various parts of the world. The press release about the link between work-related stress in men and cold symptoms [1] led to full articles in the *Daily Mail, Daily Telegraph, Daily Mirror*, the *Sun* and the *Irish Daily Mail* and then coverage in an additional 30 regional newspaper editions. There were features or news pieces on 10 national and regional radio stations including two interviews with the Society on national radio and the story featured on 3000 global websites at the last count. A previous press release on violence against nurses throughout Europe attracted similar widespread media interest [2]. The media release on the benefits of returning to work when suffering with mental health problems [3] was one of the top 10 visited stories on the BBC news website and received extensive radio coverage. Other releases such as one about the risk of death from diseases and injuries caused by alcohol, drugs and sexual habits in different jobs and professions [4] have not received coverage in the mainstream media but have received important widespread coverage in print and online trade media. Other stories, for example one on upper limb disorder in reindeer herders released at Christmas [5], have not attracted quite as much interest. Our success rate in terms of attracting media interest appears to be ~50% but this is on a very small sample and we do only prepare press releases where we feel there is a good chance of the media taking an interest.

Does this matter and should *Occupational Medicine* be dabling its toes in such potentially shark infested media waters [6]? The power of the press to shape public opinion and behaviour is immense. Public health in this country (and elsewhere) is still reeling from the Wakefield incident that lead to a catastrophic reduction in uptake of childhood measles vaccinations. The paper in question, now retracted by *The Lancet* in 2010, reported on only eight cases, and yet was of sufficient interest to be taken up by the media and triggered a disastrous sequence of events [7]. The true extent of this saga and its consequences is still emerging and the impact on mumps incidence in this country may not be known for a number of years yet [8]. Thirteen years after the retracted paper was published and 2 years after Wakefield was struck off by the General Medical Council, measles vaccination rates are only just now approaching pre-publication rates of 92%, a phenomenon that has undoubtedly lead to countless cases of significant morbidity including deafness and brain damage [9]. While the medical profession and its journals undoubtedly triggered this episode, the press was instrumental in publicizing research that was subsequently shown to be not only wrong but also fraudulent.

Why do medical journals prepare press releases? The answer is not simple vanity although it would be difficult to dismiss that as part of the reason. Scientific papers used for articles in the popular press are cited significantly more times than those that are not. In 1991, the *New England Journal of Medicine* (*NEJM*) published research that showed that articles quoted in the *New York Times* were cited 73% more than those that were not. Not only that but this effect persisted for 10 years, and to prove that this was not just a selection bias because these were more important papers, they looked at papers selected for articles when the *New York Times* went on strike for 3 months. During that time, the paper was still prepared but not printed and they found that there was then no difference in citation rates between papers selected for the press and those that were not. A scientific paper in the *NEJM* looking at the impact of press coverage concluded that ‘coverage of medical research in the popular press amplifies the transmission of medical information from the scientific literature to the research community’ [10].

Increased citation rates attract higher profile authors who are pushed to publish in those journals with the
highest impact factor, the impact factor being a measure of citation rate where total citations are divided by total number of published research papers over a fixed time. While the impact factor is controversial in some quarters, a bit like democracy, it remains the least worst system we have despite its obvious flaws. But as well as publishing in a higher impact journal, authors like having their work cited in the popular media. When JAMA, the Journal of the American Medical Association decided that its impact factor was not high enough and set out to do something about it, one of the actions they took was to increase the number of press releases they made. It worked and their impact factor now ranks among the highest for the large general medical journals [11].

We have now looked at the impact of press releases on papers published in Occupational Medicine. Between March 2008 and May 2011, we prepared 12 press releases relating to scientific articles and one commissioned review we had published. We compared online access and citation rates to a randomly selected paper in the same issue as the press release paper. Online access to HTML original research articles increased by >6-fold and downloaded pdfs increased three and half times. This means that there was a significant increase in the number of people downloading the entire article from our website although we do make press release articles freely available which might have some impact on this access. In addition, however, citation rates to the original research articles we published were increased by 72% compared to the controls, almost exactly the same increase reported by the New England Journal of Medicine. If confirmation of the power of the press were needed, then this demonstrates it and we are not a mainstream medical journal.

So will we continue to woo the media despite the perils? Yes we will. Authors like it, it raises the profile of the journal and it helps the Society to deliver its very important message. Just as important as the message, however, is that it is delivered responsibly and that the messengers are trained in dealing with the media. The Society of Occupational Medicine has already invested in media training for those in its senior offices and has enlisted the services of a professional media consultant over the last few years. This commitment needs to continue as we are well aware of the danger of distortion given the fleeting open window of media exposure. We do need to be expert in preparation, presentation and delivering sound bites. To date, our experience has been positive and we have found the press to be responsible. At times we have even been impressed at their diligence and understanding of their responsibility and press articles have often only appeared after an interview where they are careful to check the facts and which can expose our shortfalls. But we are also mindful that this is not always the case and you only have to read Dr Ben Goldacre’s Bad Science in the Guardian to be aware of the pitfalls and very real health hazard that irresponsible reporting of science can cause [12]. With that in mind, we will continue to approach working with the press responsibly and carefully and with the intention of bringing benefit to the journal and the Society and the health of working people.

John Hobson
Honorary Editor
e-mail: hon.editor@som.org.uk

References