

Speaking notes for Fiona Fox
Director, U.K. Science Media Centre
At Oct. 2 launch event

A tale of 2 science stories

I have only 15 minutes, so I'm just going to tell you a tale of two science stories. One which took place before the SMC was set up, and one which happened just last year and which I think demonstrates what we've achieved

In 1999 the U.K. had a national debate about GM crops. It raged for months and saw some of the most shocking headlines on science ever produced – including one on a tabloid, screaming “Frankenstein Crops Kill” next to a picture of Tony Blair turned into Frankenstein.

The people who engaged in that national media debate on GM were the following:

Environmental campaigners – Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth

Politicians and political commentators on both sides

GM companies – mostly Monsanto

And a tiny handful of Scientists – mostly celebrity scientists like Lord Robert Winston and Baroness Susan Greenfield, who saw the attack on GM crops as a wider attack on science.

There was one group that – with a few honourable exemptions – ran in the opposite direction from the GM debate, and that was plant scientists: the very scientists who had developed the GM approach after many years of looking for new and better methods of plant breeding. How do I know that? – because I've asked them – the wonderful mild-mannered scientists who work in world-class plant science institutes like Rothamsted Research, the John Innes Centre, IGER etc . Why did they run the other way? Mainly because they were totally bewildered by the fuss, by the screeching headlines, by finding their science – (almost totally ignored by the news media until then) – suddenly front-page news in the worst possible way. Because many were hostile to the media and not skilled at engaging with it.

At the end of this debate – largely played out in the media – the U.K. government bowed to public opinion and effectively said no to GM crops in the UK

So here's the SMC's philosophy in shorthand – we will never let that happen on our watch.

Now already that sounds horribly like the science establishment striding in to control and close down debate, and you may well be saying not only is it wrong but 'chance would be a fine thing'. But what we are saying is not that there will never again be a national furore over a new scientific advance, but that never again will the scientists who best understand that advance be absent from the debate. Or putting it another more personal way – I don't give a damn if the British public say no to GM crops – I have no personal axe to grind over that technology – but what I care about passionately is that the public and policy makers in future will say yes or no to any new technology after a balanced, reasoned and evidence-based debate in which they had access to the best possible scientists and scientific information available.

Tim Radford, veteran science editor of the Guardian newspaper, once horrified a bunch of very eminent scientists when he reproached them for not welcoming the 'Frankenstein crops kill' headlines as a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get their own science out to the public.” Of course they were horrified and many actually thought he was joking – so awful and inaccurate were these headlines. But he was not joking and to a large extent what Tim says embodies the SMC's philosophy – we see science in the headlines as an opportunity rather than a threat and if plant scientists had shared that philosophy and embraced the heightened interest in their science – the outcome of the debate may have been very different.

So has the SMC succeeded in preventing another GM? – well yes – in small ways we do so every single day by ensuring that every single time a science story breaks, the news media have easy access to the best scientists and the best scientific information in the form and timeframe that they need them.

But let's take just one example which I think proves that things have changed and that we have fulfilled our remit. The issue of human-animal hybrid embryos in stem cell research.

While the stem cell community in the U.K. could see that using animal eggs to overcome the shortage of human eggs was a good idea to better understand how stem cells may tackle diseases like Parkinson and Alzheimer's, the public and government could not. And in December 2006 the Department of Health shocked many in the science world by publishing draft new laws which would ban this research following a public consultation which showed strong public opposition.

This was the SMC's moment. With powerful religious pressure groups lining up for a fight, many of the public citing the “yuk factor” as the main cause of

their opposition, and the government clearly giving in to both, the stage was set for another GM style debate. Early media reports carried pictures of humans with cows heads and thanks to a particular Catholic Cardinal the word Frankenstein was once again splashed across the tabloids.

But this time scientists were ready. In the intervening years the SMC and others had spent a considerable amount of time persuading, training and preparing stem cell scientists for engaging in the media. And critically – we had already run many background briefings for key journalists on stem cell research, therapeutic cloning and combining human and animal material in stem cell research. So as well as a group of scientists prepared to step up to the plate, we also had a group of science and health reporters on every major news outlet who already had an excellent grasp of the complex science involved and knew and respected the leading scientists.

Over the next 18 months scientists briefed journalists formally on over 10 occasions, did literally hundreds of interviews and seized on every development as an opportunity to explain their science to the public again. No interview, no matter what hour of the day or who else was in the studio, was ever turned down.

The result of all this effort came last June as MPs filed into the lobby of the House of Commons to vote by an overwhelming majority in favour of allowing research using human-animal embryos to continue. As one leading academic, Professor Martin Bobrow, said after the vote:

"For me this episode does not represent a triumph of one point of view, or of one group of people. It is a story of success in ensuring that the facts were sufficiently clear and accessible so that decisions were not distorted by misunderstanding or misrepresentation."

And it was not lost on anyone that the story of human-animal embryos played out differently because the scientific community behaved differently, as Dr Geoff Watts, medical scientist and BBC Broadcaster, explained:

"The saga of animal-human hybrid embryo research turned out quite differently to those on MMR and GM crops – although the phrase 'turned out' is misleading. This would seem to imply a degree of chance; that things just happened to go well. The reason that things went well was that nothing was left to chance. Scientists and press officers all foresaw the possibility of another debacle and took steps to prevent it. Their proactive efforts paid off. In spite of some lurid headlines, public and politicians were given an opportunity to hear – most often from the

scientists involved in the research themselves – what would be done, what would not be done, and what the benefits might be."

And of course this change in culture was also noted – though with less approval – by the opponents of science. A few months ago I was speaking about this issue at a conference only to be confronted by Josephine Quintavalle –Director of CORE – the Committee on Reproductive Ethics and arch opponent of all embryonic stem cell research. Amazingly Josephine's main line of attack is that the scientists had dominated the media debate on hybrids to the exclusion of all others and she accused the SMC of master-minding this. Before finishing her angry attack Josephine demanded that I be made to answer her accusation, to which I said: I would like to thank Josephine very much for her compliment – after decades of scientists being accused of ducking the controversial issues and being totally ineffective at engaging with the press, I think to stand accused of dominating this debate is something of a triumph!!