◆Research Integrity and the Media

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Bethesda, Maryland

Panelists:
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New England Journal of Medicine
Boston, Massachusetts

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Journals, scientists, and the mass media have a sometimes strained but symbiotic relationship in relating science to the public, said Anne Thomas, director of communication at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Reporters rely on journals to help guide them to what science is credible, important, and new. Journals gain prestige and exposure by having their articles covered in the media. Media coverage of science helps scientists in the long run by increasing public support for science.

The strain, Thomas said, results from differences between scientists and reporters in perceptions of what defines news. Thomas said that scientists view reports published in journals as works in progress, whereas reporters must overemphasize the importance of research to get space in their newspapers or time on the airwaves. Therefore, reporters are sometimes apt to exaggerate, and their stories often mention few of the nuances or cautions contained in the research paper and have little or no discussion of limitations of the research. The result is often an exaggerated picture of the benefits of the research.

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Funding for research often comes from tax dollars, so government-funded scientists are obliged to communicate their findings with the public through reporters, Thomas said. Scientists should be trained to communicate with reporters to help prevent misunderstandings. Scientists often assume that reporters are cheerleaders for them, she said, and do not expect reporters to treat them with the same skepticism that they treat politicians. "Scientists know very little about how journalism works", she said. "Many come away feeling disappointed if not quite battered."

What reporters and scientists both have in common, Thomas said, is that they are seeking the truth. Reporters want to get the story right, and public-information officers can help reporters get context and perspective in science stories by providing experts. Well-prepared background information that gives context can also help improve the quality of science reporting. "We really do believe it improves accuracy of science reporting to the general public", she said.

Another practice that facilitates accurate science reporting is the embargo system, said Robert Utiger, deputy editor of the New England Journal of Medicine. Embargoes allow reporters to evaluate research better, seek advice and criticism, and convey information more thoughtfully, he said.

Jack Killen, director of the Division of AIDS at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in NIH, used media coverage of AIDS to exemplify good and bad interactions between scientists and the press in science reporting. The mass media can promote public understanding of advances in research but can also promote misunderstandings, confusion, and mistrust among the public, he said. He gave as an example a front-page story in the Chicago Tribune that was secondarily interpreted in later stories as suggesting that volunteers had acquired AIDS from a vaccine! Killen said giving reporters background information that is detailed and well balanced is essential to ensuring accurate dissemination of information to the public and to preventing misunderstandings. The panelists agreed that giving reporters context and perspective bridges the distance between scientists and reporters and leads to better science reporting.