

Symposium on ‘Nutrition: communicating the message’

Scene setting: who is the voice of nutrition in Britain?

Judith Buttriss*

British Nutrition Foundation, 52–54 High Holborn, London WC1V 6RQ, UK

Currently the public is being inundated daily with information about diet and health, which is often conflicting and frequently not based on good quality evidence. This situation is fuelled by the ready access to information of variable quality via the internet, which has short circuited the previous checks and balances applied by researchers and the peer review process, whereby scientific findings were batted around and refined within the confines of the scientific research community, occasionally emerging to be incorporated into the advice given by health professionals. This situation, coupled with concern about the growing trend whereby detailed nutrition advice is sold to the public by self-styled ‘experts’ with no formal degree-level training in the subject, prompted a conference that highlighted the importance of ensuring that nutrition advice is evidence-based, using a series of topical overviews. In recent years the Nutrition Society has played an active role in establishing mechanisms to assist the public in their search for high-quality dietary advice by badging individuals appropriately qualified to offer sound and relevant advice on nutrition.

These days the public is bombarded daily with advice on a multitude of aspects of diet and nutrition via media articles and reports, which are at best confusing, often conflicting, frequently not based on good quality evidence and at worst based on frank misinterpretation or misunderstanding of nutrition science. Real-life examples include: ‘Ketchup could help to fight off breast cancer’, ‘a tin of sardines is nature’s Prozac’, ‘occasional coffee can be fatal – but chocolate is fine’, ‘cinnamon may help to stop diabetes’, ‘now an egg a day can keep the doctor away’. It is hardly surprising that consumer surveys regularly find that the public believes that the experts keep changing their minds, and that many individuals are either lulled into a false sense of security or become apathetic, as a result of the confusion, and persist with their unhealthy food habits. Furthermore, surveys have revealed that many health professionals also rely, to varying extents, on the media for much of their information on nutrition and may also have an incomplete, inaccurate or incorrect knowledge base if they don’t refer back to the scientific literature to check their facts (Buttriss, 1997). The purpose here is not to undermine journalists’ efforts to entertain their readers, but to emphasise the crucial role they have in helping to ensure that nutrition research is accurately

reported and placed in the context of existing knowledge and policy.

In this context, how are messages about aspects of nutrition science determined? In the days when nutrition and health stories were less favoured by the media, scientific findings were batted around and refined within the confines of the scientific research community, occasionally developing sufficient prominence to emerge and to be communicated to a wider audience (e.g. health professionals), eventually reaching the public or being incorporated into health policy (Fig. 1). These days, however, the ready access the public has to electronic media and communication has meant that this process of checks, balances and refinements is short-circuited and scientific findings are delivered directly to the public, often before the scientific community is aware that the work has been conducted or published.

The media is also selective in the type of information it reports and the emphasis given, and newspapers have been criticised about their reporting of health-related issues, in particular attributing too much certainty to research findings, for premature representation of findings as breakthroughs, and for being alarmist, incomplete or inaccurate (Deary *et al.* 1998; Moynihan *et al.* 2000). A recent study

*Science Director of the British Nutrition Foundation and Honorary Secretary of the Nutrition Society.
Corresponding author: Dr Judith Buttriss, fax +44 207 404 6747, email j.buttriss@nutrition.org.uk

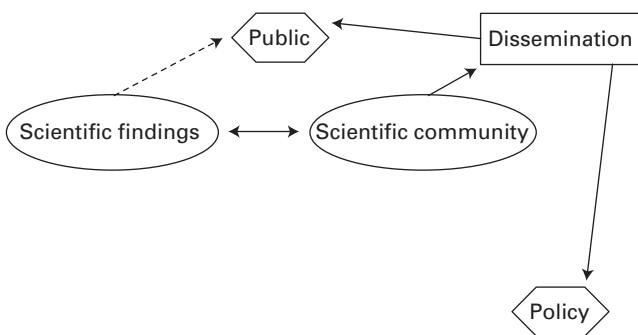


Fig. 1. Who determines the scientific message and its context?

published in the *British Medical Journal* (Bartlett *et al.* 2002) assessed the fate in terms of media coverage of *Lancet* and *British Medical Journal* articles published during 1999 and 2000. The study revealed that bad news was more likely to be reported in newspapers than good, newspapers underreported randomised trials, emphasised bad news from observational studies, and ignored research from developing countries.

Another growing concern is the worrying trend whereby individuals sell nutrition and dietary advice to clients, yet have no formal degree-level qualifications in the subject. Such advice is often linked to the sale of supplements of various sorts.

The purpose of this joint British Nutrition Foundation and Nutrition Society conference was to use a series of overviews of topical nutrition subjects to emphasise the importance of basing nutrition information and advice on sound evidence-based science. This approach is essential if the public is to be protected from potentially harmful misinformation based on half-truths and myths.

Each of the speakers represented organizations that make it their business to use an evidence-based approach: the Food Standards Agency, British Nutrition Foundation, Nutrition Society, British Dietetic Association, Institute of Food Research, the Rowett Research Institute and MRC Human Nutrition Research. Each speaker addressed the questions 'who should be the voice of nutrition in Britain?' and 'who should determine the scientific message and context?'. Also discussed were the actions taken to address the shared and growing concern about the plethora of individuals who these days claim to be expert in nutrition and the provision of dietary advice, yet have not undergone the formal degree-level training recognised by the British Dietetic Association and Nutrition Society.

There is agreement amongst these organisations that, whilst it sometimes may seem that the tabloid press is the voice of nutrition in Britain, it should be a collective of the sorts of organisations represented by the speakers at the meeting, characterised by degree-training (as a minimum) in nutrition science or dietetics and wedded to a philosophy of providing advice and information based on peer-reviewed scientific evidence.

The concern about the limited, and sometimes non-existent, scientific underpinning for the dietary advice emerging from some sources is not unique to UK; dietitians in North America have issued advice with regard to internet

sites, which includes the following: (1) is the site selling something; (2) does it sound too good to be true; (3) are they relying on testimonials. Furthermore, in November 2001 guidelines on science and health communication were published as a result of a partnership between the Royal Institution, the Social Issues Research Centre and the Royal Society (www.royalsoc.ac.uk). A meeting to bridge the gap between scientists and media professionals took place in July 2002, organised by the European Commission under the auspices of the European Group on Life Sciences. Participants from thirteen countries looked into ways of establishing closer links between scientists and the media, with the objective of making media coverage of scientific issue clearer and more balanced (<http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/life-sciences>).

In recent years the Nutrition Society has played an active role in establishing mechanisms by which the public and others can identify individuals appropriately qualified to offer sound and relevant advice on nutrition, based on completion of thorough degree-level training and a minimum of 3 years relevant experience, and has taken the lead in setting standards for public health nutrition. This action was taken because concerns already existed about the lack of coherence in the advice being given about the nutritional aspects of public health issues. There was a need to establish use of an evidence-based approach as the norm, and in order for the science of nutrition to be viewed as a key strand in achievement of public health objectives, there is a need for those engaged in nutrition to speak with one voice and with authority in the context of interactions with the public and also with policy makers, including government.

Actions already taken by the Nutrition Society include:

establishment of a Register of Nutritionists, which identifies appropriately qualified individuals for interested parties both within and outside the Society (degree-level training plus a minimum of 3 years relevant experience); introduction of the identifiers Registered Public Health Nutritionist (RPHNutr) and Registered Nutritionist (RNutr);

introduction of associate registration for new and recent graduates from appropriately rigorous courses, whilst they acquire the experience required for full registration; setting of professional standards for training in public health nutrition by accreditation of degree level and masters level courses.

Another area where misinformation about diet is rife is the sports and fitness industry. Specialist registration in sports and exercise nutrition is set to be in place in 2003, under the auspices of the Society, this area being another one in which there is considerable concern about the extent of scientific knowledge and in-depth training of individuals offering advice. Work is also underway to set standards for training in nutrition science and to provide fast-track registration (as now exists for public health nutrition) for those graduates from recognised rigorous degree-level courses. More information about these Nutrition Society initiatives and other long-term objectives can be found at www.nutsoc.org.uk and in the members' newsletter, *The Gazette*.

References

- Buttriss J (1997) Food and Nutrition: attitudes, beliefs and knowledge in the United Kingdom. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* **65**, Suppl., 1985S–1995S.
- Deary IJ, Whiteman MC, Fowkes FG, Jaeschke R, Heddle N & Keller J (1998) Medical research and the popular media. *Lancet* **351**, 1726–1727.
- Moynihan R, Bero L, Ross-Degnan D, Henry D, Lee K, Watkins J, Mah C & Soumerai SB (2000) *New England Journal of Medicine* **342**, 1645–1650.
- Bartlett C, Sterne J & Egger M (2002) What is newsworthy? Longitudinal study of the reporting of medical research in two British newspapers. *British Medical Journal* **325**, 81–84.