MRC scientists and the media: attitudes to and experiences of reporting their findings to the public

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Background: Attitudes of South African scientists to the media and their experiences of reporting findings to the public and media have not been documented. The South African Medical Research Council (MRC) has an excellent research record - but awareness of the MRC among the South African public is very limited. Promoting scientists’ engagement with the public would publicise and increase knowledge of research findings.

Objective: A postal survey was carried out among MRC scientists to obtain a ‘baseline’ indication of attitudes and experiences regarding communication to the public and media. Results would inform development and implementation of strategies to fast-track promotion of science communication.

Method: A questionnaire with prompted responses was sent to 253 MRC scientists. One hundred were returned (39.5%), representing an impressive assemblage of research leaders.

Findings: Although 48.9% of the scientists had published over 30 articles in peer-reviewed journals, 38.9% had never had these mentioned in the lay media. The vast majority (92.8%) agreed that they had a duty to communicate their research to the public, and 70.8% would like to spend more time on this. When source or subject of a news story, 65.4% had been satisfied with the coverage. Most (86.9%) had never had any training in dealing with the media, but 80.8% were interested in it.

Conclusion: Scientists generally want to communicate and see the potential benefits. Science communication and development of links with community and media should be seen as part and parcel of scientific research, and given due recognition and support.