Science communication is a relatively new discipline in South Africa and the world. The science community has begun to realise the important role science communication can play in advancing society. Professor Anthony Mbewu, CEO of the Medical Research Council (MRC), South Africa, believes science communication is vital in producing a healthy nation. And investors and governments should not view funding scientific research as an expense, but rather an investment, because a healthy population results in a healthy economy.

Science communication can positively affect the three main areas shaping scientific research. Firstly, in communicating the importance of research to gatekeepers, policy makers, and the media in terms of generating funding and shaping positive public opinion. With the majority of South Africans being ‘scientifically illiterate’ it is science communicators’ responsibility to improve knowledge, understanding and interest in scientific research.

Secondly, in promoting public participation in research or clinical trials through creating enough awareness to develop informed consent.

Thirdly, in translating scientific findings into everyday, comprehensible terms that will positively impact people’s quality of life - not only regarding health but also career development and education. Mbewu believes that accurate and responsible communication can change the public’s perception that research is vague and obtuse.

New and innovative ways need to be found to communicate science to the layperson. Robert Inglis of Jive Media, South Africa, and Dr Pradeep Srivastava from the Central Drug Research Institute, India, are two pioneers in this regard.

Inglis revealed the move of the science community towards using cartoons as a valuable resource for communicating science. He listed four projects he has been involved in that aim to bring science to the masses. These are:

1. **Eclipswatch** - which used cartoons to educate people on eclipses and the dangers of looking directly at one. These cartoons were distributed through the popular press.

2. **Agent Zee** - a comic book series aimed at tertiary students, profiles cutting-edge research in scientific fields.

3. **LADUMA! Stick to Your TB Gameplan** - aimed at primary school children and combines activities with a cartoon. Its aim is to increase TB medication adherence and positively influence behaviour.

4. **Mission MeerKat** - seeks community appeal to educate the region of the importance of their local ‘MeerKat’ radio telescope.

Srivastava is the mastermind behind the highly popular **Scientoons**. These cartoons combine scientific explanations with one-scene ‘skits’ explaining difficult concepts or placing the science in an everyday situation. Scientoons are currently part of the biggest science awareness project on the African continent and have been found to be effective communication devices to explain unusual concepts like nanotechnology. Both methods make use of visuals, wit and storytelling to engage different people and make science real, fun, interesting and understandable.
Improving the status of women in science also concerns science communicators

Prof Anusuya Chinsamy-Turan highlighted the ways in which South African Women in Science and Engineering (SAWISE) is trying to improve the status of women in the scientific fields. She stated that the challenges faced by women are, amongst others, a lack of permanent, high-ranking positions, under-funding (less than 20% of all research funding is allocated to women’s research) and few role models for girls interested in science.

These shortcomings can be rectified through establishing support networks, funding research and studies through a variety of initiatives such as SAWISE’s Angus Scholarship, and raising the profile and prevalence of women scientists in the media.

“ASCC has provided me with hope for the clearly growing rapport between scientists and the media.”

- CHARMEELA BHAGOWAT, SOUTH AFRICA

SOME ASCC STATISTICS

- PRESENTERS: 49 speakers from 11 countries (South Africa, Spain, India, Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria, Zambia, Lesotho, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Australia)
- DELEGATES: 118 from 16 countries represented
- MEDIA: 9
- SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTIONS: 23 institutions represented

Dr Olufemi Bolarin

Dr Olufemi Bolarin at his presentation based on the content of agricultural information published by Nigerian newspapers. Olufemi’s argument is based on research into the amount of media reportage of agriculture. He said that, “the Nigerian press has a moral duty to pass information to the populace”.

Olufemi’s argument was contested by the audience on the ground that blame could not be placed solely on the print media as platforms such as the radio were better suited to reach the farming community, who listen to the radio more than they read the paper. His findings were that only 37% of newspaper editions included agricultural related stories. Most of the population (70%) living in Nigeria are farmers. If the media serves as a purveyor of change (70%) living in Nigeria are farmers. If the media serves as a purveyor of change, then science communication, e.g. climate change, cloning etc.

Field/lab visits – to meet scientists face to face.

Although many of the 181 students reached through the TUT courses since 2007 expressed initial disinterest in science journalism, by the end of the course they showed a “hunger” for basic science knowledge and a clear appreciation of the topic. In 2008 the course used an online curriculum produced by the World Federation of Science Journalists (WFSJ).

The second speaker, Prof Gervais Mbarga from the Universite Laval in Canada, highlighted the challenges facing science journalists in Africa and other developing countries, such as the scarcity and isolation of quality science journalists and lack of training opportunities available. He outlined the pros and cons of the classical approach of science journalism training via formal, university based courses and workshops, and the related high dropout rates versus a newly implemented initiative called SICODP (Science Journalism Cooperative).

Implemented by WFSJ and funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), this Pan African and Pan Arab initiative aims to break the isolation experienced by science journalists in these regions and to increase their quality via in-house training opportunities involving 29 African countries and 46 science journalists to date, skip off benefits include the establishment of science journalism communities, new驾驶员 10 in Africa. Trans-border media stories have highlighted the interconnectedness of science journalism – with simultaneous reporting on international stories in different countries.

The session participants concluded that a variety of training approaches are needed and the continued isolated efforts highlight the need for a bid to be made by South Africa or another African country to host the 2011 Conference of the World Federation of Science Journalists.