A Reporter’s Advice to Medical Researchers

Daniel Q. Haney

In my three decades with the Associated Press, I interviewed thousands of physicians and scientists. Most were gracious and generous with their time. But occasionally, I felt like an attorney taking a deposition from a reluctant witness. And who could fault their lack of enthusiasm?

I like to think that reporters are not especially unpleasant to deal with, although their need to work quickly, often against ridiculous deadlines, can make them seem pushy and impatient. No, what makes the media truly scary for many medical researchers is the lack of control they feel over the finished product. They worry that reporters will jumble the details of their research or overstate its significance. So they try to avoid this outcome by saying as little as possible.

Not a good strategy, in my experience. Reporters want to get the story right. When they fail, it is often because they misunderstand what is said to them. Questions are imprecise; answers are unclear. And what should have been spelled out clearly is never said at all. Scientists can go far toward assuring the accuracy of the news reports about them by spending some time ahead of the interviews planning what they will say. My advice comes down to this: Speak plainly. Be modest.

No matter how erudite the reporter, use jargon-free English as much as possible. Naturally, many scientists feel most comfortable in the precise vernacular of their field. But one of a reporter’s functions is translating that technical language into the kind of words ordinary people use. By speaking plainly, scientists help guarantee the reporter understands the work and makes the translation accurately.

This means more than substituting common words for technical ones, such as saying “spreading” instead of “metastatic.” Researchers should be especially wary of otherwise ordinary words that have unique meanings in science. For instance, a result that is statistically “significant” may be utterly insignificant in the usual sense of the word. One science writer early in his career was flummoxed by a doctor’s description of a pharmaceutical study. The specialist explained that his team planned to inject drug A in one arm and drug B in the other. The puzzled writer quite reasonably asked, “If you inject everybody with both drugs, one in one arm and one in the other, how will you tell which drug made them better?” That was how he learned what “arm” means in a drug trial. But what if he had not asked?

Just as important, researchers should resist the temptation to inflate the significance of what they have done. One of the media’s shortcomings in covering medicine in general, and cancer in particular, is an unflagging desire to offer hope, whether it is justified or not. Reporters instinctively push scientists to make the strongest positive statement about their work, because that makes the most compelling story. Scientists need not play along. But often they do, implying that no matter how obscure or preliminary their results, they will lead someday to important new medicines. A better answer is the honest one: You simply do not know where this work will lead. Many more steps lie ahead. Chances are great that it will never pay off in better patient care, as much as you hope otherwise.

Scientists can also improve the quality of their news coverage by keeping these points in mind:

- When possible, find out something about the journalist before the interview begins. Is the reporter new to the science beat or been at it for decades? The level of detail useful for a veteran of a trade magazine will obviously be different than for a general assignment reporter from a local TV station.
- Prepare for the interview. Researchers should think about the two or three important points they would like to see included in news articles, such as their key findings, how they may change perceptions, and where they could lead new research. Practice reciting these comments, even writing them out if necessary, and be sure to make them during the interview.
- Develop some analogies to make the work more understandable. Comparisons with car parts or light switches or whatever else can help illuminate complex biology for reporters and their audiences.
- Give reporters plenty of background and context. Tell them how this discovery fits into the larger problem of controlling disease. Go over what led up to this work and what the next steps will be. Make it clear that this is not the end of the story.
- Be generous with details. When interviewed at scientific meetings, researchers should offer reporters copies of their slides. These will invariably be more accurate and complete than the writers’ scribbled notes. Suggest other sources of background, such as journal articles and Web sites.
- Offer other names for interviews. Good reporters try to speak to experts outside the group whose work is being reported. Suggesting names of colleagues who are especially knowledgeable and eloquent helps assure that stories will put the work in context.
- Be reachable. Reporters often have questions that come to mind when writing. Offer cell phone numbers and email addresses where they can get quick responses. This is especially important after interviews at medical meetings.
Feel free to request a chance to check over direct quotes and other material attributed to you before they are published, although reporters are often reluctant to turn over the entire story for review in advance.

Disclose conflict of interest. Be forthcoming about consulting arrangements, patents, directorships, and other financial conflicts. Reporters will appreciate the honesty, even if they decide they are not important enough to include in the story, and they may sense a lack of candor if they turn them up on their own.

Medical researchers who accomplish something newsworthy can strongly influence their own coverage for the better. But to keep the print and television pieces about their work accurate and free of hype, they should assume that good journalism is as much their responsibility as the reporter’s.
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