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Communicating science

Indroduction

Public acceptance of fundamental biomedical research is increasingly limitated – especially in areas that involve the use of animals in research. The usefulness and legitimacy of animal experimentation are increasingly the subject of public debate. This is all the more astonishing as medical progress that stems from basic research directly benefits society. However, people do not usually make this association.

There is significant discrepancy between the contributions of biomedical research to society and its perceived value in the public eye, despite the increase in public communication work undertaken by many scientists in the recent past. Science nights and coffee-table talks, genetic research days, science fairs, senior citizen universities and student labs all aim to deliver more insights into the world of research.

What can be improved?

Propagate communication

Scientists communicate intensively on the objectives of their work, their success and its scientific value, but critical issues are often blanked out. These issues include animal research, risks of research and the potential abuse of new technologies. It is also important to communicate not only results and scientific controversies, but also the processes and approval procedures of scientific processes and thus achieve a deeper understanding of research.

Increase professionalization

When it comes to communication, scientists mostly have to rely on their talent. Today, this is no longer sufficient. The communication of science has to be (gently) professionalized. Training and continuing education in the communication of science should be part of the foundations of any scientific curriculum. Interaction with the media is a skill and appearances in radio and TV need to be practiced again and again. This also includes familiarity with local peculiarities in dealing with the media (right of prior viewing, authorization).

Improve recognition for engagement in communication

Communication is time-consuming and often takes resources from science and teaching. Unlike the representatives of groups opposed to animal research who are active in the media, researchers communicate in addition to their daily work and receive neither payment nor recognition for this task. Basic research as a rule has practically no professional, paid lobbyists.

Scientific reputation is acquired through outstanding research results, not through public relations work. The lack of reward for such work is a systematic error that damages the sector itself. Anyone

who takes time to engage in the communication of science should not be at a disadvantage in their scientific career. On the contrary, there should be support for this communication role, because it helps to bolster research in terms of the basic conditions of society and the law. Thus it deserves respect.

Reinforce the proactive approach to communication

In science, communication is often not seen as one of the *To Dos* with top priority. Trust is wrongly placed in the public irecognizing the added value of research, because it benefits directly in the form of new medicines and a better quality of life.

However this is not the case. The correlation between biomedical research and the vaccine that is used to immunize the individual is not rooted in the public consciousness. The key messages of biomedical research are thus not communicated. The consequence is a lack of trust, lack of acceptance and too little support – from politics, business and society.

When is communication successful?

These 1: *Greater importance must be attached to communication with politicians and society*
Not all scientists are yet aware of how hugely important communication with politicians and society is. Their objective must be to help shape the public debate about research.

Thesis 2: *Communication is successful when it takes place on a level playing field and is not all one-way*
A precondition for this is that scientists are willing to face up to critical public discourse, to address possible anxieties in the population and take criticism seriously.

Thesis 3: *Transparent communication promotes trust*
Public stakeholders must be informed in a transparent and proactive way – including about critical issues.

Thesis 4: *Do good and talk about it*
Acknowledgment of the 3R concept not only has to be lived, but also communicated.

Thesis 5: *The simpler the language, the better the impact*
The relevance of animal experiments must be explained through simple and clearly understandable examples.

These 6: *Synergies can be used thanks to interconnected communication structures*
The more professional the work, the less the stress will be for each individual.

Our contribution to a better communication of science

In view of the problems described and the theses derived from them we scientists commit to the following principles:

1. We communicate with openness and transparency – including about animal experiments. We address the problems proactively and openly declare that animal experiments play a part in our research. We explain the way in which the various interests are weighed, so public stakeholders can understand why a given animal experiment justifies the potential suffering of animals.

2. We allow journalists access to our laboratories.
3. We invite opinion formers, media people and teachers to have a dialog with researchers about the problem area of basic research.
4. We endeavor to use language that is easy to understand. This may require professional coaching. The ground rules have to be learned and observed.
5. We declare our solidarity with all researchers who depend on animal experiments. We all reject unjustified allegations against individuals. We jointly and publicly condemn vandalism, threats and other criminal activities.

The contribution we expect from politicians, universities and the public

1. Universities and institutions offer teaching and further education courses for the communication of science. They provide the necessary professional, technical and human resources infrastructure for this. The ability to present research appropriately in public should become an integral part of the training and continuing education of students and researchers. It would be ideal if an awareness of how important research is to society were taught at school.
2. Researchers who participate in the public debate about science and research and spend time and money on it should be rewarded in a suitable form for their engagement. An appropriate incentive system, such as awards for the communication of science, must be developed by universities in collaboration with the federal institutions that promote science. Scientists who engage in communication should not have to jeopardize their own scientific reputation. On the contrary, this engagement should become an additional feature of scientific reputation.
3. Like all interest groups, the universities and research institutes should employ professional specialists who are able to communicate the complexity and importance of animal experiments to the media clearly and in generally understandable language. The communication specialists should also draw the attention of politicians locally, nationally and internationally to the concerns and the potential of biomedical research.

Further supportive measures

Measure 1: Institutionalization of the Basel conference on an annual basis; further instruments for internal networking and mutual interchange (e.g. newsletter)

Measure 2: Institution of a central communications office in Germany – along the lines of «Forschung für Leben» in Switzerland

Measure 3: Sounding out the idea of a prize for special engagement in science communication affairs

Measure 4: Development of scientists' own communication platforms and channels that enable content to be communicated professionally and effectively.