

Handbags and gladrags

In my microbiological career to date, I have tended to avoid contact with the media. Germs always seem to get such a bad press – nothing is ever good news and no matter what the story, the main question would be 'so, will it kill me?' Having lived happily and grubbily with microbes for so long, I didn't want to be alarmist or cornered into making a ridiculous quote.

However, in August, I was asked to comment on a study about mobile phone contamination, since they 'had more germs than a toilet seat'. Feeling sorry as ever for the much maligned toilet seat, and remembering the key message from the SGM media training course I attended – if you don't do it, someone else will – I finally entered the world of the press.

My quote was as inoffensive as possible: 'Mobile phones are stored in bags or pockets, are handled frequently



and held close to the face. In other words, they come into contact with more parts of our body, and a wider range of bacteria than toilet seats'. The *Daily Mail* ran the story on page 3. My statement had been extended a little, and the context was also somewhat different from what I had intended... 'phones crawling with potentially lethal bacteria', '*S. aureus*, causing illnesses from pimples and boils to pneumonia and meningitis, and a close relative of the superbug MRSA'. I was immediately besieged by an interested media. I felt I had to explain what had been written, rationalizing the statements, emphasizing the hygiene aspects of mobile phone use, and mentioning cross-contamination, so I 'ran' with the story.

I was on Radio 5 Live, Radio 1Xtra, Radio One and 13 BBC local radio stations. I redirected enquiries that I was too busy to handle to SGM for others to deal with. I believe Hugh Pennington was on Radio 5 Live later in the day. For local radio, I was shut in a room at the BBC with some headphones and a glass of water, fielding questions as the stations came on line during a 2 hour period. Some of the broadcasts were live, others were recorded and edited. Some of the interviews were serious, some dismissive, others light-hearted. Radio Cornwall told their listeners (including my family back home) that I was a 'local girl'. I even managed a few laughs when I remarked, in defence of toilet seats, that they only came into contact

◀ Jo during her GMTV interview with Lorraine Kelly.

Recently **Jo Verran** got caught up in a news story. Here is how she became a media star...

with one part of the body, and that was not (usually) the face!

Granada TV filmed a short clip in the labs for the teatime show, and I was interviewed live at lunch! It was OK. I felt that the main thing was not to over-commit to any statement about people being killed by mobile phones! Exhausted by the end of the day, and after a sleepless night waiting for the mobile phone companies to chase me, I went to work very early next day to avoid any TV cameras and journalists (of course there weren't any!). However, via the net, the news had gone global. CBS, ABC, CNN, French and Belgian TV and radio stations wanted to talk about mobile phones. I went on holiday. The story quietly disappeared.

On return from holiday, queries from magazines awaited: *Marie Claire*, *Readers' Digest*, etc. Long forgotten colleagues made contact. An old schoolfriend read about me in *Strasbourg*. A research group looking at the cross-infection potential of mobile phones was also in touch, along with companies wanting to disinfect phones.

A couple of months later, I had also become the new 'how dirty is your mobile/handbag/makeup?' expert, and appeared on GMTV with Lorraine Kelly (and met Ashley from X-factor!). We looked at contamination of a few handbags, and I was again filmed in the lab as well as being on live television. The brief slots were very tightly controlled, the intention being that specific messages were conveyed (discard old makeup, avoid putting bags on toilet floors, ensure re-used

water bottles are cleaned, etc.). I had to wear a lab coat, so that I looked like a scientist, and I also had to stand up, which made me look like a dwarf as everyone else was tall. Lorraine Kelly's interview style was very informal, but also so helpful, in that she made it easy for me to remember to address all the key points.

My final media encounter focused more specifically on makeup bags, for a style programme on local satellite TV 'Channel M'. The entire interview was filmed in the lab, and the *Manchester*

On 1 November 2006, the Royal Society of Chemistry held its annual 'Science and the Parliament' event at Our Dynamic Earth, opposite the Scottish Parliament building in Edinburgh.

▼ Professor Anne Glover delivering her address at the Science and the Parliament 2006 event. Royal Society of Chemistry



Evening News ran an accompanying article.

So, after the initial overflow of mobile-related adrenalin, overall I felt that the media experience hadn't been too bad. My reputation hadn't been destroyed. My university was thrilled with the exposure. I felt more confident about talking to the press, and had realized I was able to interview live on TV or radio. I had helped promote microbiology to a wider audience and got people talking about it. Don't know what I was so worried about!

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The SGM holds occasional one-day media training courses for members, to help them deal with the press and to promote their work more widely. Please contact the External Relations Office if you are interested in attending one (e pa@sgm.ac.uk).

Science and the Parliament 2006 – a manifesto for science

The event, which attracted hundreds of participants from across the science and political communities, strives to raise awareness of science issues to MPs and civil servants working in the Scottish Parliament. With elections taking place next year, the aim of the day was to look at key scientific issues that may face those elected next May.

The event started with addresses from a host of first class speakers, including RSC President, Professor Jim Feast, and Deputy First Minister and Science Minister, Nicol Stephen MSP, who appealed to the delegates to make science more enjoyable for children.

The Chief Scientific Adviser for Scotland, Professor Anne Glover, also addressed the delegates and spoke passionately about the 'enviable history of scientific achievements in Scotland'. She went on to highlight the role

that science plays in all aspects of the Scottish Executive's work. Professor Glover, from the University of Aberdeen, is a long-standing member of the Society and was an elected member of SGM Council from 1995 to 1998.

Breakout sessions followed the presentations, which addressed four policy areas: enterprise and life-long learning, education, environment and energy. A representative MSP from each of the political parties also spoke of their party's policies for science.

The day ended with an evening reception and exhibition. With hand hygiene in relation to hospital-acquired infections in particular, but also food production, likely to remain a burning issue for any parliament, SGM was among the many exhibitors in attendance with a topical display

on this theme. Flyers on hand hygiene, MRSA and *Clostridium difficile*, as well as hand-soaps, were available on the stand for the delegates to take away.

Science and the Parliament 2006 was organized by the Royal Society of Chemistry in association with the BA, Campaign for Science and Engineering, Institute of Biology, Institute

of Physics, Royal Society of Edinburgh, Association of Science Education, Society of Chemical Industry, SCOTETA (Engineering & Technology Association – Scotland), and SGM, of course!

Faye Stokes
Public Affairs Administrator

Helping the Lords (and Ladies)

The External Relations Office has an active programme of keeping the profile of microbiology high to members of both houses of parliament, policymakers, opinion-formers and their advisory services. This includes the regular distribution of selected issues of *Microbiology Today*, briefings on topical issues in microbiology and other relevant publications, placing targeted advertisements in parliamentary publications and holding occasional presentations in national and regional parliaments. We also offer impartial information on any microbiology topic on request. This is provided through our network of over 2,000 specialists who have agreed to help with enquiries.

SGM is clearly now becoming an accepted one-stop shop for parliamentarians wishing to raise particular microbiological issues and seeking the facts to back them up. A good example recently concerned the somewhat unlikely topic of chewing gum.

Sticking to the point

On 31 October Lord Selsdon asked a Parliamentary Question in the House of Lords, 'To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they will take to reduce the level of urban pollution caused by the illegal depositing of used chewing gum on pavements and streets.'

What has this got to do with microbiology? Lord Selsdon wanted to find out what the health hazards were from deposited chewing gum – did it harbour pathogens, could it transmit disease; if so, how long would so-called 'gum turds' be a danger to the

public? He phoned the SGM to find out. We were able to put him in touch with experts who could answer all these queries. The question provoked a good deal of debate in the Lords, as recorded in *Hansard*, and in writing to thank us for the help, Lord Selsdon was delighted to say that the response had been covered on Radio 4 and by BBC Online. As a result of highlighting this issue he hopes that the Government will fund research that will lead to safer deposition of used gum by the public.

Baroness Masham of Ilton also welcomes SGM information and



Photodisc

recently sent us a copy of *Hansard* which includes the discussion of her question 'What actions are [Her Majesty's Government] taking to prevent the spread of *Clostridium difficile* in hospitals and in the community?'

Anyone wishing to receive a copy of the SGM briefing on *C. difficile* should contact pa@sgm.ac.uk

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