



comment

Bad reporting in the media is hard to swallow

A popular television news programme recently ran a campaign based around matters microbiological. My heart sank as I watched the daily reports, based in a kitchen in 'Middle England', showed how easily 'bacteria' can be spread by cleaning materials: assuming all bacteria to be bad. I am not for one moment suggesting that we should ignore the dangers posed by pathogenic bacteria that use food as a vector for infection or intoxication; nor do I believe that unhygienic practices are to be encouraged. What concerns me is the demonization and trivialization of microbes to grab viewers.

Further disappointment ensued on visiting the programme's website, where I found that 'The number of cases [of *E. coli* O157] in the UK has tripled in the last decade, jumping from 361 in 1991 to over 1,000 in 1997.' Those figures are over 11 years old! In 1997 human cases of *E. coli* O157 peaked, with over 1,087 isolates referred to the Health Protection Agency. There followed a sharp decline in referrals until 2002 when there were 595 human isolates, with a steep rise to 1,003 cases in 2003. It seems lazy to report old data, particularly when the new data are even more interesting. What is more, within two sentences the programme's subsequent website refers both to 'O157' and '0157'. I am sure a significant proportion of microbiology

undergraduates, at least at Level 1, may struggle to identify which is correct, let alone tell you what the 'O' in 'O157' means, but it is simply sloppy reporting to use both without questioning which is correct, and why.

Later in the week, viewers were treated to a demonstration, again from a kitchen, of the difference between 'best before', 'sell by' and 'use by' dates. To illustrate the point, among other items, the reporter pulled a yoghurt carton from the fridge that was beyond its 'sell by' date and questioned the family about whether they would eat it. Part of the question contained the, to my ears somewhat sneering, suggestion that 'experts say that eating this is probably safe'. The irony here is that yoghurt evolved as a method of safe food preservation; a means of prolonging the shelf life of an otherwise highly perishable foodstuff.

Perhaps I am sensitive to the reporting of science by the media. After all, I was the 'scientist(s) [who] warn of GM crops link to meningitis', according to one national newspaper – I believe this to be a gross misrepresentation of my views. This caused me significant problems for a few hours. I was, however, greatly comforted by a piece of advice from a senior civil servant with whom I spoke as the storm raged: '... today's newspapers are tomorrow's fish and chip wrappings'.

What is the answer? I believe we need better education and better communication. At Leeds, we have a

Microbiology is almost always in the news. But how reliable is its reporting? While a high profile for our discipline is welcome, **John Heritage** wonders if this comes at the expense of misrepresentation and public misunderstanding of the issues?

synoptic module in which students develop their critical analysis. The most popular examination question this year, and the one that attracted the highest mean score, was a critical analysis of a microbiology-themed newspaper article. We must also learn to communicate better with journalists. Theirs is not an easy life; they need to become instant experts on topics dictated by their editors. When journalists seek our advice, we should not try to dodge our responsibilities to explain as clearly as possible the science behind the story. Given the deadlines to which they work, we should not be surprised that offers to check articles for veracity are often not taken up. By improving communication we will have a better-educated media, which, in turn, will inform the public more accurately.

John Heritage

Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Biological Sciences, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT (t 0013 343 5592; e j.heritage@leeds.ac.uk)

Further reading

Verocytotoxin-producing E. coli O157 strains examined by LEP reported to the Health Protection Agency Centre for Infections. Isolations from Humans England & Wales, 1982–2006. HPA [www.hpa.org.uk/webw/HPAweb&HPAwebStandard/HPAweb_C/1195733780833?p=1204031521097 (accessed 16.06.08)].

Please note that views expressed in Comment do not necessarily reflect official policy of the SGM Council.

▲ 'Today's newspapers are tomorrow's fish and chip wrappings.' *Gustolimages / Science Photo Library*