

Report 43: Is it important to educate the public, and if so, how best?

Convener: Amy Kostant

Brief History:

How to position NIEHS with the media – does the Institute want to raise its profile?

Who is responsible for communicating the science emanating from NIEHS: the scientists, the Institute (communications staff) or a partnership?

Discussion Highlights:

Challenges – institutional comfort level – controlling the message; scientist comfort level; political ramifications; changes to science media – fewer reporters; science literacy – public education needed

Communicating to the public is the cutting edge of translational research - this should be key to NIEHS (BPA is a good example)

Is there value in determining newsworthiness of research?

Journalist needs: two sides to make a good story, plus middle-of the road ‘voice of reason’ to provide solid science background. NIEHS role might be to provide the highest credibility background info.

Vulnerability of scientists speaking to the press without training. How to prepare for this and lessen the risk/anxiety?

Science literacy: Consumers need to be able to make their own decisions.

NIEHS isn't using modern-day communications technology. Have to move beyond email and static websites to engage with audience and built next generation of science interest.

Recommendations:

Make communication a part of the research culture – not an afterthought. This includes thinking through in advance the public health impact of the research and how to make it accessible.

NIEHS should carve out areas of expertise where science is most excellent and therefore, less controversial.

Streamline process for -- and encourage and train -- NIEHS researchers to provide background to journalists – on the record.

Develop ways to talk about uncertainty in science – without sounding uncertain. Educate the press and the public on the uncertainty inherent in good science.

Internally – for its own staff, NIEHS should provide environmental health-specific presentation/media training so they can be go-to people for the media on given topics. Partner with foundations to fund this training, and also to support broader communications work.

Make use of thought leaders: extramural scientists who are good communicators, communications experts, and experts from complementary disciplines.

NIEHS should re-invest in environmental health science education to increase environmental health science literacy. There is a lack of awareness of what already exists – needs to be built up and disseminated.

Explore appropriate (effective) technologies for communicating with the public.

Discussion Participants: Austin, Collins, Edwards, Germolec, Graedon, Hall, Jung, Moore, Newschaffer, O’Fallon, Schroeder, Walker, Wexler