

~ Working with the Media ~

Introduction

The media may contact the medicines information centre for general background information or for a professional opinion on any medicines or poisons related issue. On the other hand you, or your employer, may wish to use the media to convey a message to the outside world.

Dealing with the media is an opportunity to reach a wider audience, but it is not easy. Do not get involved unless you have a thorough grasp of the subject they are interested in. Also remember that knowing your subject is one thing – putting it across is another.

If the media requests an interview from you, you can say no. It's not an ego trip and you should never think it is. There is always a risk, when dealing with the media, that your information or opinions will be misrepresented, that you will make a very public mistake or that you will be lured into commenting on an area that you would rather not. You must be aware of this. On the other hand saying 'no' may mean that you miss an opportunity to educate the public on a vital issue, correct a story which has been misrepresented, or raise the profile of your profession, your employer or yourself.

You should have procedures for establishing what a caller's interest is. On occasions, reporters may seek information without disclosing that they are making a media enquiry.

Never give an interview if you don't have time to prepare properly.

Your Employer

It is important to be aware of your employer's policy on dealing with the media and to adhere to it. For example, many Trusts require prior notice before television cameras are allowed on the premises.

Be aware that media involvement can reflect on your employer as well as yourself. Media attention may also have legal repercussions. Consequently, it is recommended that staff who have regular dealings with the media should have this activity added to their job description. This is particularly important if you provide advice to non-local media, or act in an advisory capacity for non-NHS groups, as part of your NHS employment.

Enquiries may be related to specific incidents involving your Trust or patients treated by the Trust. All requests of this latter type must be cleared with e.g. the Trust's Public Relations Officer. It is advisable to liaise with the Trust Public Relations team, even if local repercussions are not immediately apparent. They may be able to give you advice or background, and it also prevents possible duplication of effort within your organisation.

Do not talk to the media about a situation concerning an individual patient treated by your Trust, unless specifically requested by your employer. Given your access to privileged information as a Trust employee, and possibly being aware of details unofficially via the local grapevine, you could end up breaching patient confidentiality.

Some employers offer training on media relations for appropriate staff.

The Enquiry

Document the full background information on the enquiry in the usual way. Obtain a contact name and telephone/fax number. Ask how urgently the information is required as it will usually be necessary to call the enquirer back. All enquiries from the media should be referred to a senior member of MI staff, who should be formally identified in a local policy.

Do not be drawn into giving an off-the-cuff answer or comment before you have had time to think about whether you want to be involved, the facts and the implications, even if this is said to be “off the record”.

Is it appropriate for your centre to deal with the enquiry? Do not be pressurised into exceeding your area of expertise. It may be preferable to refer the caller to another organisation or individual at this stage. If in doubt, discuss with a senior member of MI or the pharmacy department, and talk to your employer’s PR department.

No information from MI should be given to the media without the knowledge of the medicines information pharmacist in charge who should check any information/statement provided.

Note that media organisations are most unlikely to pay for an interview. Radio or television interviews can also be quite time-consuming, especially if you have to travel to a venue first.

You should establish at an early stage whether you are expected to represent yourself, your department, your employer or your profession. Clarify that you will be described appropriately.

You should go into any interview – press or broadcast – positively and ask yourself what you or your organisation wants to achieve from it.

Enquiries from the Press

If you are in a position to be useful to the press try and establish a rapport with local papers. If possible build links with a named individual – the more senior the better.

Tips for Press Interviews:

- ◆ Establish exactly who it is that you are speaking to unless you already know them. Your employer’s PR department should be able to confirm the identity of local reporters. Unless obvious you might ask why the reporter has chosen to contact you particularly.
- ◆ ‘On the record’ is quotable and attributable; ‘off the record’ is not to be printed. However, not all reporters will honour this arrangement and you are advised to treat everything as ‘on the record’. If you don’t want it reported, then don’t say it!
- ◆ Concentrate on what you are saying and don’t allow yourself to stray into areas that are not your expertise. You can say: ‘I don’t know’. Do not say ‘no comment’ as it sounds suspicious; it is better to say something bland but truthful instead.
- ◆ Reporters may record interviews, but you should be told if this is going to happen.
- ◆ Try and be as straight, open and conversational as possible. This enables the reporter to understand the issues and report accurately.
- ◆ It is recommended that you do not ask to see a draft of the article for approval before going to print. It indicates a lack of trust on your part and many reporters will refuse anyway. Even when agreed, the deadline for responses will be very short.

Broadcast Interviews

If you are being interviewed for television or radio ensure that you know beforehand whether this will be 'live' or not. If given the choice there are advantages to giving a live interview – it is impossible for the interviewer to selectively edit what you say. However, live interviews are probably more stressful.

Once you know you will be interviewed, prepare a brief for yourself. Identify a small number of vital messages that you need to get across. One technique that is used to emphasise these vital messages is the "Position – Reason – Example – Position" approach. A simple example below:

"Our Medicines Information Centre does not provide a service to the public directly [position], because there are other services with greater training in this area who can provide a better service [reason]. For example, NHS Direct is available 24 hours per day and is staffed by nurses with proper counselling skills [example]. So we don't deal with the public directly ourselves but our experts do help services like NHS Direct if they get stuck [position]."

You can use techniques like this to steer the interview round to the points you want to make, but for this to work you must *prepare* and you must *remember* the points. So keep your key points few in number.

You may be able to agree key questions with interviewers in advance. Sometimes they may actually ask you what the major issues are for technical subjects, so that they can phrase their questions correctly. Don't expect to have the whole interview spelled out for you in advance. This never happens.

If there are areas that you definitely *cannot* comment on – eg for legal reasons, or due to lack of expertise – let the interviewer know in advance and the reasons why. If there are areas that you do not *want* to comment on because they are awkward, or they show you/your employer in a bad light, you may draw the interviewer's attention to them by asking for them not to be addressed. The interviewer may ignore your request and see this as an extra good twist to the story that he had not thought of! If appropriate, identify in advance ways to avoid being drawn into these areas about which you do not want to comment.

Tips for Television Interview

- ◆ Be on time for a studio interview to give yourself the opportunity to relax and get used to the atmosphere. You could also ask the interviewer what the first question will be. This will help you make a good start.
- ◆ Know your subject, but don't memorise a script in advance or you will sound 'scripted'. Use examples to explain what you mean.
- ◆ Stay within your own knowledge. Deny expertise if you have to; never guess or conjecture.
- ◆ The way you dress is important. If you want to appear as a professional expert, or are representing your organisation, dress appropriately!
- ◆ When you speak, do so slowly and clearly, but use animation in your voice. Use short sentences in conversational English and avoid jargon or unfamiliar abbreviations.
- ◆ Remember your key points and work them into the interview. Do not necessarily be led by the interviewer's questions. In a difficult interview, take control and make your points regardless of the questions asked.
- ◆ Don't rush, and don't let the interviewer rush you.

- ◆ Avoid 'dangerous' topics, and the use of words like 'problem', but anticipate the worst possible question and prepare for it. Don't just hope it won't be asked.
- ◆ Make eye contact with the interviewer not the camera in a television studio. In a remote studio, you will have to look directly into the camera.
- ◆ Gestures emphasise points, but if used a lot can be a distraction. Similarly don't fidget, squirm or scratch, and don't keep saying 'um' or 'er'. Use a pause instead if you have to.
- ◆ Concentrate the whole time. Do not assume that the interview has ended or that you are 'off camera' just because the interviewer acts as if it has been concluded. There have been cases where interviewees have been wrong-footed such that apparently off-the-record comments or actions have been subsequently broadcast.
- ◆ A good interviewee helps the interviewer.

Radio Interviews

Many of the points raised in the above section also apply to radio interviews. The most important difference is that you cannot be seen, so all the emphasis from the listener's point of view is centred on your voice. Be calm and make your voice sound interesting by varying the delivery and emphasising your key points.

If you are being interviewed on the phone:

- ◆ Stand when you are being interviewed, don't sit. You will feel more in control.
- ◆ Even outside work hours dress in your working clothes.
- ◆ Don't have a radio within earshot – it causes feedback, and there is a disorientating transmission delay.
- ◆ Don't have people in the room with you. Be alone.

UKMi Support

UKMi Publicity Group have received some training on dealing with the media, and members of the group may be a helpful resource. The group also keeps central records of MI pharmacists with expertise on particular aspects of drug therapy and medicines management. The group can be contacted via the UKMi Publicity Officer. This is Dr Simon Wills from Wessex RMIC, who can be contacted on 023 80 796908. The Deputy Publicity Officer is Ms Sue Austen from South Manchester Medicines Information Centre, on 0161 291 3331.

Simon Wills, Wessex Drug & Medicines Information Centre.
Sue Sharpe, Chief Executive, Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee.
Peter Campion, Head of Communications, Southampton University Hospitals Trust.
Stephen Lutener, Head of Professional Conduct, Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain.
Anne Lee, Glasgow Medicines Information Centre.
Sue Austen, South Manchester Medicines Information Centre.
UKMi Publicity Working Group.
Elena Grant, West Midlands Medicines Information Centre.
Fiona Woods, Welsh Medicines Information Centre.