

## Summary

- We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Independent Monitor for the Press (IMPRESS) Code Review. Our points centre on the issues of 'Accuracy', 'Journalism online' and 'Public safety'.
- When the media focuses only on the positives or negatives of a medicine without sufficient context this may lead to inaccurate perceptions of the benefits or risks associated with a treatment. The incorrect use of statistics when reporting can also be misleading.
- Guidelines such as the Science Media Centre's press release labelling system and its '*10 best practice guidelines for reporting science & health stories*' support journalists in the accurate and balanced reporting of scientific material.<sup>1,2</sup> We recommend that the IMPRESS Code Committee considers such guidelines when reviewing its Standard's Code.
- The potential for dissemination of inaccurate scientific information via online sources such as social media and blogs, has been highlighted by the Academy previously and can fall under the topics of 'Accuracy' and 'Public safety', especially when viewed in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic. We welcome IMPRESS's focus on 'Journalism online' in its call for evidence, as it is an area of increasing importance which should be considered a priority.
- It must be recognised that, while interests can be a potential source of bias, researchers' interests must not automatically be used to undermine the credibility of the research or influence public opinion. We encourage IMPRESS to ensure that researchers' interests are not misrepresented in the media. We also encourage IMPRESS to review its guidance on transparency in light of the principles we outline in our report<sup>3</sup> and to consider the need for further frameworks for declaring and managing financial and non-financial, direct and indirect interests for the news publishers it represents.

## Introduction

1. The Academy of Medical Sciences is the independent body in the UK representing the diversity of medical science. Our mission is to promote medical science and its translation into benefits for society. The Academy's elected Fellows are the UK's leading medical scientists from hospitals, academia, industry and the public service. We work with them to promote excellence, influence policy to improve health and wealth, nurture the next generation of medical researchers, link academia, industry and the NHS, seize international opportunities and encourage dialogue about the medical sciences.
2. Our evidence for this response draws on previous workshops and reports by the Academy of Medical Sciences, in particular the Academy's report on '*Enhancing the use of scientific evidence to judge the potential benefits and harms of medicines*', which incorporated views

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<sup>1</sup> Science Media Centre. *10 best practice guidelines for reporting science & health stories*.

<https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/10-best-practice-guidelines-for-science-and-health-reporting.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Science Media Centre. *AMS press release labelling system for new medical research*.

<https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/AMS-press-release-labelling-system-GUIDANCE.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2017). *Enhancing the use of scientific evidence to judge the potential benefits and harms of medicines*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/44970096>

gathered through public dialogue and during workshops such as '*Communicating evidence about medicines*' and '*Communicating evidence in the media*'.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

3. This evidence is applicable to the issues of 'Accuracy', 'Public safety' and 'Journalism online' outlined in the call.

## Ensuring balanced and contextualised reporting of the benefits or harms of a medicine

4. As highlighted in the Academy's report '*Enhancing the use of scientific evidence to judge the potential benefits and harms of medicines*', ensuring that reporting of the benefits and harms of a medicine is balanced and contextualised is vital to accurate interpretation and in turn, public safety, two key features of the call for evidence.<sup>7</sup> The report noted that news organisations may use successive pieces to report claims and counterclaims about medicines and may emphasise controversies. This makes it difficult for the public to accurately assess news about treatments. The report stated that there is considerable public interest in providing a complete picture on the potential benefits and harms of medicines to responsibly inform healthcare decisions.
5. The issue of balanced reporting was also emphasised in the Academy's workshop '*Perspectives on communicating evidence about medicines*'.<sup>8</sup> Participants at the workshop noted that there is a risk that media stories focus on the potential harms or the potential benefits of a medicine without context, which could be detrimental as it might lead to inappropriate use of an overhyped drug or underuse of a drug which may have important benefits. It was agreed **that it would be helpful if media reports routinely placed new information about the benefits or harms of a medicine in the context of existing knowledge about that treatment and alternative approaches.**
6. In response to one of the recommendations in our report, the Science Media Centre has generated a press release labelling system.<sup>9,10</sup> This system makes clear whether research findings have been through peer-review and gives a summary of the type of research, e.g. randomised controlled trial. One of the main purposes of this system is to help journalists easily assess the nature and significance of new research. This system has since been

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<sup>4</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2017). *Enhancing the use of scientific evidence to judge the potential benefits and harms of medicines*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/44970096>

<sup>5</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2016). *Perspectives on 'Communicating evidence about medicines'*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/41560-57b2aa9fb300a.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2016). *Perspectives on 'Communicating evidence in the media'*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/41534-57a30aa387107.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2017). *Enhancing the use of scientific evidence to judge the potential benefits and harms of medicines*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/44970096>

<sup>8</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2016). *Perspectives on 'Communicating evidence about medicines'*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/41560-57b2aa9fb300a.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2017). *Enhancing the use of scientific evidence to judge the potential benefits and harms of medicines*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/44970096>

<sup>10</sup> Science Media Centre. *AMS press release labelling system for new medical research*. <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/AMS-press-release-labelling-system-GUIDANCE.pdf>

widely adopted with evaluation showing positive feedback from journalists.<sup>11,12</sup> In the pilot programme, journalists said that 'it will help them to find information more quickly, crucial in time poor newsrooms'.<sup>13</sup>

7. In our report, we also recommended that regulators such as IMPRESS should adopt the Science Media Centre's '*10 best practice guidelines for reporting science & health stories*' as their standards for use in the newsrooms and should work jointly with the scientific community on enforcing these standards in the news.<sup>14</sup> Other guidelines to encourage best practice exist, which IMPRESS may wish to consider within its review. One such example is the BBC guidance on statistics and risk communication that has an emphasis on health and contains a checklist for reporting on risk (see section below on 'Accurate reporting of statistical information by news outlets').<sup>15,16</sup>
8. **We would encourage the IMPRESS Standards Code Committee to consider good practice guidelines such as the Science Media Centre's press release labelling system and guidelines for reporting science and health stories when considering accuracy, in order to ensure contextualised reporting on medicines.** This is of particular relevance in the current climate with regards to COVID-19 vaccinations and therapeutics.

### Accurate reporting of statistical information by news outlets

9. Participants at the Academy's roundtable '*Perspectives on Communicating evidence in the media*' felt that it is critical to ensure accuracy when information is disseminated through the media and that journalists have a responsibility to ensure accuracy.<sup>17</sup> The accurate reporting of statistical information was highlighted as being critical to prevent confusion. Absolute risks as well as relative risks should be given where possible. It was noted that odds ratios are difficult concepts to communicate to non-specialist audiences and their misuse may be misleading, for example if they are used incorrectly as relative risk figures.
10. As it stands currently, the IMPRESS Code and Guidance does not explicitly state any guidance around the reporting of statistical information. **We propose that IMPRESS should provide, alongside the Code, guidance on the accurate use of statistical information to ensure that quantitative information is communicated in a way that is meaningful to non-specialist audiences.**

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<sup>11</sup> Science Media Centre (2020). *The labelling system for medical research press releases – summary of feedback from press officers using the system*. <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/the-labelling-system-for-medical-research-press-releases-summary-of-feedback-from-press-officers-using-the-system/>

<sup>12</sup> Science Media Centre (2018). *A new labelling system for medical research press releases*. [https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/a-new-labelling-system-for-medical-research-press-releases/?cli\\_action=1613725484.134](https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/a-new-labelling-system-for-medical-research-press-releases/?cli_action=1613725484.134)

<sup>13</sup> Science Media Centre (2018). *A new labelling system for medical research press releases*. [https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/a-new-labelling-system-for-medical-research-press-releases/?cli\\_action=1613725484.134](https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/a-new-labelling-system-for-medical-research-press-releases/?cli_action=1613725484.134)

<sup>14</sup> Science Media Centre. *10 best practice guidelines for reporting science & health stories*. <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/10-best-practice-guidelines-for-science-and-health-reporting.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> BBC. *Editorial Guidelines: Reporting Statistics*. <https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidance/reporting-statistics>

<sup>16</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2016). *Perspectives on 'Communicating evidence about medicines'*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/41560-57b2aa9fb300a.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2016). *Perspectives on 'Communicating evidence in the media'*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/41534-57a30aa387107.pdf>

## The potential for dissemination of inaccurate scientific information via online sources

11. The risk that online news outlets, social media and blogs may act as channels for the dissemination of inaccurate, sensationalised or unbalanced material was identified in the Academy's roundtable '*Perspectives on Communicating evidence in the media*'.<sup>18</sup> The issue of accuracy of reporting of health information on social media and blogs was also mentioned in the Academy's report '*Enhancing the use of scientific evidence to judge the potential benefits and harms of medicines*'.<sup>19</sup> The report highlights that the proliferation of online sources outside the mainstream media presents opportunities for inaccurate and potentially damaging information to find its way to the public. This relates to the call for evidence on 'Public safety' as well as 'Journalism online'.
12. The report suggested that helping people discern what is reliable information and giving those outlets more prominence would be more effective than greater regulation of online sources outside of mainstream media.
13. Participants in the public dialogue workshops carried out by the Academy as part of its report '*Preparing for a challenging winter 2020/21*' also mentioned that social media was seen as a less trustworthy source of information about the pandemic, with information being too subjective and opinion based.<sup>20</sup>
14. **The Academy welcomes IMPRESS's focus on 'Journalism online' in its Code Review call for evidence. In the three years since our report<sup>21</sup> was published online sources have proliferated and are used more widely and this area should be considered a priority, especially in the light of the coronavirus pandemic. The Academy looks forward to seeing future mechanisms developed in this area.**

## The reporting of conflicts of interest

15. The Academy's workshop '*Perspectives on conflicts of interest*' recognised that researchers' interests can be a potential source of bias.<sup>22</sup> However, it made the point that 'care should be taken not to routinely conflate conflicts of interest with bias'. The Academy has noted that researchers' interests, particularly links with industry, have in the past been used in the media as a proxy for bias or as a means to question the researcher's credibility or that of their research.<sup>23</sup> This relates to the call for evidence on 'Accuracy'.
16. In the IMPRESS Code section on 'Transparency', the issue of conflicts of interest held by journalists and publishers is considered. The Academy's report '*Enhancing the use of scientific evidence to judge the potential benefits and harms of medicines*' recommends

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2017). *Enhancing the use of scientific evidence to judge the potential benefits and harms of medicines*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/44970096>

<sup>20</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2020). *Preparing for a challenging winter 2020/21*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/51353957>

<sup>21</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2017). *Enhancing the use of scientific evidence to judge the potential benefits and harms of medicines*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/44970096>

<sup>22</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2016). *Perspectives on conflicts of interest*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/41514-572ca1ddd6cca.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2017). *Enhancing the use of scientific evidence to judge the potential benefits and harms of medicines*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/44970096>

that media regulators such as IMPRESS develop frameworks for declaring and managing financial and non-financial, direct and indirect interests for the news publishers it represents.<sup>24</sup>

- 17. We encourage IMPRESS to guard against the automatic use of interests as a proxy for bias in research. We also encourage IMPRESS to review its guidance on transparency in light of the principles we outline in the report<sup>25</sup> and to consider the need for further frameworks for declaring and managing financial and non-financial, direct and indirect interests for the news publishers it represents.**

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This response was prepared by Claire Gorby, Policy Intern, and informed by members of the Academy's Fellowship and our previous policy work in this area. For further information, please contact: Angel Yiangou, Policy Manager ([angel.yiangou@acmedsci.ac.uk](mailto:angel.yiangou@acmedsci.ac.uk); +44(0)20 3141 3224).

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<sup>24</sup> Academy of Medical Sciences (2017). *Enhancing the use of scientific evidence to judge the potential benefits and harms of medicines*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/44970096>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*