

SENSE ABOUT SCIENCE

A new organisation, sharing many of HealthWatch's aims and concerns but with relation to the world of science in general, came into being three years ago. Ellen Raphael explains.

BACK in 2001, the newspaper front pages were ablaze with headlines about mobile phones 'frying your brain', genetically modified 'Frankenstein foods', the MMR vaccine, experiments using animals, and the dangers of cloning. Scientists seemed very much on the fringes of many of these debates, and their scientific evidence and data had even less of a presence.

Responding to this apparent challenge to reasoned debate, Dick Taverne, a member of the House of Lords' Animals in Scientific Procedures Committee and himself married to a scientist, wrote and published a series of articles. He was inundated with calls and letters from people, including leading figures from the worlds of science and medicine, telling him "you must do something".

He did do something. At the end of 2001, he convened a meeting which resolved that scientists need to take more responsibility, and do so more immediately, for putting evidence at the centre of debates about scientific issues. In 2002, after recruiting a director, the collaboration became Sense About Science, an organisation to promote an evidence-based response to matters of science and risk among institutions, government, the media, companies and NGOs.

In 2003, following a very busy first year and rapid growth of a network of people keen to contribute to a more reasoned discussion of scientific controversies, Sense About Science was formalised as a Charitable Trust. It is governed by a Board of Trustees, many of whom have led Sense About Science from that initial meeting. The charity is further supported by a 31-member Advisory Council of scientists and individuals with a passion for science, who are keen to promote the evidence-based approach.

Funding moves at a much slower pace than social debates, but with the pump-priming help of a few companies and societies in the beginning, Sense About Science has been able to reach a stage where its main donors are trusts and foundations.

Currently, Sense About Science is asking scientists to take part in initiatives including: peer review—building on our working party

report, *Peer review and the acceptance of new scientific ideas*; chemicals—challenging popular assumptions that natural chemicals are safer than artificial ones; radiodiagnostic screening—considering the implications of advances; and Voice of Young Science—bringing more younger scientists into difficult areas of discussion about science.

The mood is beginning to change—scientists contact us for support and advice when they are concerned about an issue and are often willing to get involved in challenging meetings and discussions. The establishment of the Science Media Centre at the same time as Sense About Science has also been very helpful, with the centre being highly effective at providing scientific voices for national news journalists.

The challenge, however, remains, and extends beyond the daily headlines. We are often struck by the strange gap between everyone talking about communicating science and the struggle to find people to do exactly that on some difficult issues. Few people propel themselves into difficult meetings with campaign groups or uncomfortable phone calls to lifestyle commentators, for example, so it takes a bit of pressure to remind people of what's at stake, both for science and society.

We need to keep supporting scientists willing to communicate when it matters most, as well as working to ensure that evidence is at the forefront of debates about science.

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