

TAKING SCIENCE TO THE MEDIA

If the quality of reporting of science-related issues starts to improve in Australia, thank Dr Susannah Elliott. She is the founding CEO of the Australian Science Media Centre, and her work is as important to the health of Australian science as any researcher.

The Centre is inspired by the British Science Media Centre, with both having been established by Baroness Susan Greenfield after the 2000 House of Lords report on Science and Society.

“We target the news media because specialist science reporters generally do a good job,” Elliott says. “However, when you have someone who is reporting on sport yesterday and avian flu today they understandably struggle.” The Centre responds to media inquiries by finding experts who can explain particular topics, but it also acts proactively.

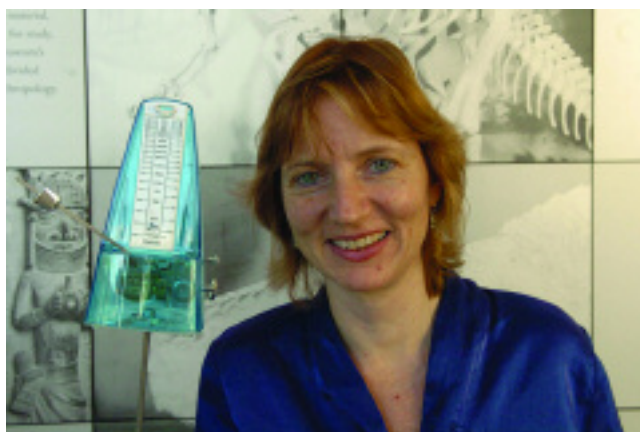
In the Centre’s second capacity, Elliott is in charge of events such as briefing sessions where a range of scientists present their views and explain their research relating to a particular hot topic. The Centre also does “round-ups” providing short comments from people with relevant expertise.

The Centre has only been operating since late 2005, but already there have been success stories. Elliott gives the example of a briefing on the “abortion drug” RU486 held the day before the Senate voted to pass control of the drug to the Therapeutic Goods Administration. “Journalists said it was the first time they had heard real facts,” Elliott says. “There was so much misinformation about, it was good to correct some of the bad science.”

In that case the issue was all over the national agenda, and journalists were hungry for the facts. At other times the Centre can draw attention to something that might otherwise go unreported. “Our first briefing was on the World Meteorological Organisation’s annual extreme weather report. It’s something that is usually missed. There were 110 items in the media, including some overseas. Normally there are three or four.”

On some topics the Centre’s work is useful but not particularly controversial. In May the Centre did a round-up of seismologists and an economist on the Java earthquake.

Elliott says that the Centre is aware that it may be accused of bias in its selection of scientists, but says: “People need to understand we are not representing a weighting of the scientific community”. Rather, they provide a range of scientific perspectives for the media to use. “It’s important in the long run we are not favouring one viewpoint,” she adds, but every briefing cannot be perfectly balanced.



Susannah Elliott is a conduit linking the media to experts on scientific issues in the news.

To avoid being subjected to excessive influence, the Centre caps its funding from any particular source. Many of the sponsors are news agencies with a vested interest in getting accurate science coverage, even if they may not run it. Other sponsors include CSIRO, Shell Australia and Ernst & Young.

The science advisory panel includes Prof Pat Vickers-Rich (*Cool Scientist*, October 2004, p.47) along with eminent names like Sir Gustav Nossal and Prof Peter Doherty.

Elliott was headhunted for her position, having previously spent 6 years in Sweden as Communications Manager and then Deputy Director at the Geosphere/Biosphere program, a network of 10,000 scientists in 80 countries studying the Earth’s life support systems.

As a child, Elliott was “really interested in science, but it was a kind of rebellion”. Her parents were actors and her mother “tried to convince me that high school was very bad”. Elliott enrolled in the Sydney College of the Arts to do painting, but a simultaneous enrolment in science at Macquarie University won out. Her PhD at Macquarie examined slime moulds.

The shift to science communication came after doing a course at the University of Technology, Sydney’s Centre for Science Communication under *Australasian Science*’s senior correspondent, Dr Peter Pockley, who later sent Elliott an advertisement for a job there. While she juggled research with teaching scientists how to communicate their work for a while, she gave up the moulds when she had a child.

“It wasn’t an easy decision to give up research,” Elliott says, “but science is a tough row to hoe with all the grant proposals you need to submit”. Her husband still works as a scientist.

Since making the jump to communication Elliott helped establish “Science in the Pub” and “Science in the Bush”, and acquired a Graduate Diploma in Journalism.