

Interview with Fiona Fox, Chief Executive of Science Media Centre

Full transcript of podcast

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Jo Revill 00:36

So pleased today to be able to welcome everyone who's tuned into this. Fiona Fox is the director of the Science Media Centre. I've known Fiona now for a number of years, both when I was a journalist, and in other roles, and now as the Chief Executive at the College. Today, I thought it'd be fantastic to hear from you, Fiona, about the work that you've done during the pandemic, with the Science Media Centre.

So this is an organisation that you founded nearly 20 years ago, I think it's your 20th anniversary next April. And I see the Centre as having played an extraordinarily important role during the pandemic.

Jo Revill 01:17

So the remit of the Centre, which is a charity is to enable scientists to be able to convey the work that they do, and explain often really difficult and really controversial areas of science to the public by working with journalists, and enables the journalists to have access to a really fantastic array of scientists in any particular field, to be able to write their stories, hopefully, with that balance with the evidence or with the data that they need to convey the importance of particular issues. But to do it in a way that's also engaging. Anyway, that's my take on what you do. But do you want to describe what you see as the importance of the Centre?

Fiona Fox 02:04

Well, thanks first, for this opportunity. It's nice to kind of have time to sit back and reflect on the last 18 months and our role in it. So I appreciate the opportunity to speak to your members. So yeah, I think you've described very, very well. Perhaps just a little bit of history as to why we were set up.

So we were set up in 2002, as you say, because of the kind of media frenzies around GM crops and MMR and animal research, where it was considered by the scientific community that scientists weren't engaging as much as needed in those big media frenzies or as effectively as other groups. So a committee was set up and sent to a center. And we're an independent press office. And as you rightly said, we've got this kind of focus on the contested controversial areas of science that tend to hit the headlines.

Fiona Fox 03:04

We also have a focus, which is a bit unusual these days, of just the news media. So whereas lots of other institutions now have big comms teams with different you know, people doing social media or creating content and indeed podcasts like this, we've decided that we'll be a small team that focuses on this, this 24 hour news beast, which is very demanding. And I suppose for us with COVID, it just felt a bit like everything we've done up to that moment was good preparation, because we do rapid reaction to breaking news. We do third party comments on new findings.

Fiona Fox 03:45

And we run press briefings and three staple services that we offered the news media, and all of them were so badly needed. You know, the news was breaking every hour of every day, as we've got now with Omicron is just new developments happening all the time. And that's what we're really good at going to our list of experts and getting to them to respond.

Jo Revill 04:11

The figures for what you've achieved are quite astonishing in this period. You've had something like 228 separate briefings that you've held on COVID. Since the start of January, since January 2020. 1,683 round ups and rapid reactions, I will come back to what you mean by a rapid reaction. And you've had more than 4,000 media inquiries during this period. So it's been an enormous amount of work, hasn't it? But should we go back to the beginning of 2020. And when did you realise that something big was happening?

Fiona Fox 04:52

Two answers to that. I think we do have something called a watch list where if we've seen some thing like a new infectious disease being covered, usually it's in the foreign pages. We do keep an eye on it because we are aware from previous infectious diseases that they do like Ebola and Zika. And that they do often end up being having a UK angle and being of interest to the science journalists in UK news that we serve. So we I remember my colleagues seeing a few more articles appearing from the foreign correspondents about this - it was called the Wuhan virus, if you remember back then, about this kind of mysterious virus that that could be alarming.

Fiona Fox 05:39

And so we asked Andy, who's our media monitor, to keep looking. And we saw all the articles. I think what was decisive because it wasn't it wasn't really until February, March, that it passed entirely over to the UK. correspondents, it was still a kind of global health story in January.

But what made it different for us was the scientists on our list: they were contacting us. In fact, you know, I haven't had much contact with Chris Whitty [England's Chief Medical Officer] during this pandemic, because he's been very, very busy. But he did actually he was one of the people with Peter Horby who chairs NERVTAG [New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group].

So these are people that know the SMC, and they were alerting us. Jeremy Farrar [Director of Wellcome] - we are housed in the Wellcome Collection next door to the Wellcome Trust. So we know Jeremy well, we bump into him in the office, and he was raising the alarm. So it was interesting, because in those early days, there was a bit of a sense that of this scare story starting so it's quite a few people saying to us all look, you know, the Sun calls it killer virus, and it hasn't killed anybody in the UK. It's not even here. I think people assumed that the SMC's job was going to be to kind of dampen down yet another scare story. But already in by mid to end of January, we knew this was different.

Fiona Fox 07:05

I think a point I made at the time is there's a difference between alarmism and alarm. We could tell that the scientists, very leading experts - David Heyman was another one as a good friend of ours who's on the WHO [World Health Organization], these are veterans of previous infectious disease outbreaks, and global health experts. And they were saying we're very worried about this. So I think then we will probably gearing up even before we needed to in the sense of you know, the journalists weren't putting huge amount of pressure on us in January. But we were proactively raising a flag with them. And we had our first briefing on number one, David about the 25th of January, and emphasised to all the journalists that the scientists were alarmed. And we had four or five leading experts on that panel. And in fact, we had a full house, all journalists came.

Jo Revill 07:54

So how do you decide how to approach a subject like an emerging pandemic? What are the kinds of things that are that are in your mind, Fiona? When you're thinking about the kind of data you might want to see presented by scientists, and how much you lead by what they're telling you as to what the key issues are? And then your sense of what the journalists want to know?

Fiona Fox 08:19

Yeah, really good question. And I think some of it is we've picked up from previous things, swine flu was huge for us. Obviously, Ebola and Zika we'd been through, although they never became huge, because the UK angle wasn't. So there was quite a lot of what we did. That is kind of standard SMC fare. And that's what I was saying about us feeling actually quite well prepared, not because we

were prepared for this pandemic, but we are prepared for big science stories hitting the headlines and to an extent, irrespective of what it is, we are prepared.

So we have this database - there are 3,000 very, very high quality, senior eminent scientists on it. And we may have keywords next to them. So on this occasion, we would have plugged in infectious diseases immunology, global health, public health.

Fiona Fox 09:25

So what we offer the journalists is, we say please tell us what is your editor asking you to write about in the next two hours? Pose that as a question, and we will put that you've basically got two lists. You've got your list of science health journalists in the nationals. And then you've got this parallel list, well several lists, of the experts. So you get the question, you put the questions to the experts and say, Can you answer these? And quite often the experts will say that's a stupid question, or that's a premature question, or we cannot possibly know that. But that's what the journalists are asking and that's what the public are often asking - which is why the journalists ask it, that's what the editor thinks needs to be answered.

So we will do our very, very best to get some kind of answer from the experts, even if that answer is, we cannot yet know.

Jo Revill 10:15

That's a really clear summary of what you've achieved and absolutely fascinating in terms of the rapport and the relationship that you've built up with those scientists who advise you. But on the other side, the journalists telling you what they want to hear, which may of course, be quite different.

So it really built up for peaked into it for you in April and May of last year, when I look at the number of briefings that you've had, it looks like a slightly insane amount of work that you had in April, May. But I think the full scale of the crisis became clear to people. And there were just so many questions that we were facing at that point around PPE, about shielding about the elderly people and how they how the virus might work across the population. And also, obviously, the vaccine question too. How do you deal with that kind of pressure, when there is just slightly unprecedented amounts of focus on one area of science?

Fiona Fox 11:19

How did we deal with it? It was phenomenal. And, you know, I have a sense that for a large percentage of people, and I'm sure this includes you and your colleagues, Jo, because we were also saying that from the other perspective, it felt to me like a lot of us were in the same boat. We had never handled this level of interest, whether that's from journalists, or stakeholders, or members in your case. It just felt, it did feel overwhelming. We've never, we've never had a story before that needed all of us. And that needed all of us, honestly, 24/7. We did sleep, I don't want to exaggerate.

But I can also tell you most definitely have evenings, where it was as busy at half 10 or 11pm, as it was at half 10 or 11 on a standard morning. So and it made me quite humble, actually. Because, you know, a lot of these institutional, they have two or three, four, maybe press officers, and they can't dedicate all of their time to this pandemic, they just can't because they've got other institutional priorities. I'm sure that's very, very true of the Royal College.

Fiona Fox 12:35

We don't have those other priorities. That's what's nice. It is not because we're better people. It is because the remit of the Centre is so narrow and so focused, that we do news, and we do science in the headlines. And so we're not obliged. We just anything else that was on the SMC's agenda just disappeared. So in that sense, I think we in some ways, we have it easier in terms of the focus and not being pulled in different directions. And we worked very long.

Fiona Fox 13:05

And we also had, which was glorious, we have this group of scientists, including many of your members, on the end of an email willing, I would say even enthusiastic, to answer journalists' questions in order that the public were getting the best, most accurate information. And that was, you know, that the positives around that really kept us going in those difficult, high pressure times.

Jo Revill 13:33

But this the point that you make about the gloriousness of working with scientists, when they just really want to convey to the public what they're doing. Is this a real counter argument to that sort of saying that people are tired of experts? Do you think what's happened is changed people's views of experts at all? If you count scientists as if you see them in that broader context as experts.

Fiona Fox 13:58

Oh, totally. And of course, I was never convinced that was true. You know, that whole Michael Gove and Brexit thing. And I remember, you know, being asked to speak on panels occasionally about that. And one of the points I make is how come that we - I mean, SMC's press conferences are visually very boring. They are four scientists sitting behind a table with a room of journalists. And we were as you say, the output went up massively in COVID. We were doing one or two press conferences a week before COVID. And we never want, we never had any indication that journalists were not turning up, that, you know, the Sun the Daily Mail, the Telegraph, the BBC, Sky News, Channel Five, they were coming to briefings and asking these senior academic, boring experts for their view. About whatever they were talking about, and reporting it fairly. So I felt that if the country had had enough of experts, they wouldn't be sending their journalists to listen to experts.

Fiona Fox 15:12

So I think it was not true that the country was sick of experts. And I, I think that was demonstrated with bells on as the pandemic went on. We came to it with more issues around the impact of

lockdown, and more societal questions, it seems to me, and we're very much in that space at the moment.

Jo Revill 15:38

So for us, as the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the issue of where children's and young people's voices came into all this was, it was frustrating, because clearly, and thank God children are not impacted very much by the virus itself, but the impact of the lockdown and the closure of schools, of course, which, you know, we see schools back now. But we see the impact on children and young people with that prolonged lockdown in a whole variety of disorders and health impacts that we deal with.

Do you think there should have been a bigger focus on impact of lockdown or not? Because that's not? That's a question around public health. And it's question around societal and ethical issues. But I think, you know, when we think about the early coverage, it clearly had to be about vaccines and PPE and testing. But do you think there should have been more discussion about potential impacts of the beginning? Or do you feel it came out in the right way?

Fiona Fox 16:46

It's something I haven't reflected on a lot, but now that you say, you know, going back to your earlier question, and my answer being we're kind of driven by the scientists to a certain extent who are coming to us. And we're then driven by the journalists and their questions. One of the things that I do remember doing is emailing people around saying, who is doing the modeling on the social impacts? Because that started to become a question. We know the cost in human life, because we've got lots of data showing it. But have we got a parallel assessment of the human cost of lockdown? And the reason that the Science Media Centre did very little, if anything on that, is because the data wasn't being generated on that.

The SMC and the media ended up focusing massively more on the health, the direct health impacts of the virus than on these, which were generally speculative, weren't they, the mental health impacts on children - the you know, I've seen references to all this - the impact on children who might be in home, where there's domestic abuse, all of those things were raised.

Fiona Fox 18:12

But none of them ever came to our door, there was no evidence of them, there was no papers being published by the science community that I was aware of, or if there were there were very few.

Jo Revill 18:24

Perhaps because that work was being done in different quarters by the public health community, or within the NHS as well. Perhaps there's a lot of people that have engaged with you in quite the same way. There's a different group of people.

Fiona Fox 18:39

Yeah, I think that's true. Whereas the nice thing about working in science is the imperative to publish. So virtually every press briefing that we ran was a link to either a preprint, which is another issue which we might touch on, or a published paper, a piece of scientific work being done by mainstream scientists. And what mainstream scientists do is, is get their science into the public domain. The UK is seen as perhaps having been more open and more transparent in some other countries with the public around emerging data and around emerging knowledge of what was happening with the virus.

Jo Revill 19:17

Did you face any kind of pushback to not to briefings or to sort of not raise particular issues? Or did you actually find that the scientific consensus was such that you were actually able to do it relatively unimpeded? Because there have been times when people have been really nervous about the briefings at the Science Media Centre was?

Fiona Fox 19:38

Oh, it's such a good question.

Jo Revill 19:43

Maybe you can't talk about it, I don't know Fiona.

Fiona Fox 19:43

I don't know if they're so interested. They are such interesting questions. So mostly, you know, the scientists rush towards us wanting to do these briefings and wanting to be open. Government communications people know that they can't pick up the phone to us and say you can't do that. They know that over many years that we're an independent press office. And we don't work like that, we're not funded by them in any meaningful way. And we are independent minded. So they know they can't do that.

Fiona Fox 20:17

However, what we came across repeatedly, I would say, I mean, very regularly, was a group of scientists who were ready to do something at 10am in the morning, and then because they have some DH [Department of Health] funding, or because they have PHE [Public Health England] funding, or because one of the panel, half of their time was working for PHE, we would suddenly get the scientists saying, I've been asked by DH, I've been asked by PHE, not to do this today, because they want to announce it at the Downing Street press conference at five o'clock. And it's very interesting, because mostly those scientists didn't like that request. They're mostly didn't like being asked that.

Fiona Fox 21:01

But it's interesting, because if the work was being funded by DH if they were part employed by PHE or whatever, they felt obliged to agree to that. I mean, I can't tell you the number of times that we would have a briefing lined up on a Monday or Tuesday with five scientists to announce a big new clinical trial or to announce some, and then I turn on Andrew Marr, and there's Matt Hancock announcing it. And it was heartbreaking because you then email all these five scientists, you'd say, well, we can still do the briefing. And you'd say, well, you can. But it's now being [reported]. And because it was on a Sunday as well, you'd get general news reporters, or political reporters. Because it's Matt Hancock, writing up a absolutely science story, you know, a science story in Sunday papers with no sights.

So there was, you know, somebody said to me, Well, what bad happens when a minister announces something rather than the scientists, you know, what harm does it do to the public?

Fiona Fox 22:04

And I felt a little bit by the end saying, I don't want to have to prove that this harms the public. But I want to put the question back to you. What are the benefits? You know, if you can have five scientists communicating this complex science to 30 or 40, or 50 of the best science journalists? Isn't that better? Isn't that very obviously better?

Jo Revill 22:32

That's, that's very interesting. Thinking about the areas that you've covered, are there any areas that you think could have been better conveyed by journalists during the pandemic? As the science emerged? Are there gaps as you look back? And clearly, we're not in a look back phase at the moment, because we have Omicron, and you're spending today working on briefings around that. But you see any gaps that with hindsight, perhaps there could have been other briefings or that the journalists should have asked more about?

Fiona Fox 23:05

I'm trying to think whether anywhere we said, because normally, our press conferences are a real mix between the scientific community coming to us with an idea and us thinking. And when we have our weekly meeting about briefings, there's an agenda item that says, what should we be doing? And they're the ones that we put together. And I know, for example, we ran a briefing on follow the science early on why where I just started to get nervous when I noticed, because at the beginning, I loved having Patrick [Vallance] and Chris [Whitty] and Jenny Harries and all of these people at the Downing Street press conference. I love that I, I'm still not sure it's the wrong thing. I know, some people think it was. But I still think that was amazing that every single day, the journalists had access to the CMO and the CSA [Chief Scientific Adviser].

Fiona Fox 23:57

But I do remember starting to get a bit less enthusiastic when very explicitly a question that should have been about political decision was answered with we're just following the science. We're following the science, the science.

Jo Revill 24:11

And I think the public had a much more sophisticated understanding of uncertainty, including scientific uncertainty, than they're often given credit for. And they have seen that play out to a huge degree during the pandemic. And even today, there's discussion on radio about masks. What do we really know about masks? And you hear people talking about this on the train, you know, where are we.. do they work. And they understand that we're still in a very uncertain world.

So I wanted to ask you actually, if there's anything that you want to ask me about, the pandemic and how we've come through as a medical Royal College, or any questions you might have.

Fiona Fox 24:50

Well, yeah, I mean, I could almost throw every question you've asked me back at you, and I would like to, and we must go for a drink. So yes, I mean, how the College managed it. And I suppose just more specifically because I don't particularly see that the media coverage in terms of different groups, I don't see, you know, how we're older people well served worthy, as you say, people with underlying health issues were they well served, and were children well served. It feels to me like children was always a big issue of interest, and schools - my husband's a teacher, you know - schools and whether they should stay open was always an issue. But I don't have, I don't have any view on how the media covered issues around children in the pandemic, but I imagine you do, because you were focused on that. And also the question you asked me about gaps, I'm just wondering whether that came from something you think that you think there might have been some gaps in the good coverage?

Jo Revill 26:00

It's hard sometimes, isn't it? So you're back with a completely fair perspective, because I think initially, when the pandemic first came about, there were great fears that children and babies would be very susceptible to the virus. Thankfully, that wasn't the case, although there were some cases of children being harmed, or few children dying. So like all the Colleges, we gathered, through our members, a huge amount of data and insight into whatever seeing on the ground, we collected, that we did research and evidence summaries, so that we could then feed that in to the NHS and others, in order to get as full a picture as possible of what was happening medically with children, young people.

We were always really concerned about schools closing down. And we advocated and we lobbied really, really hard on that. But you know, that's hard, when you've got a virus out there, that is having a really big impact on vulnerable people, on elderly people who would be very worried and

some of whom are still obviously worried about the schools having gone back, and the virus living and having a pool of transmission amongst young people.

Jo Revill 27:20

So that clearly that worry hasn't completely gone away. But I do think there has been a growing understanding of the importance, the centrality, the importance of going to school in a child's life, and the complete socialisation of the child. And of course, many, many health problems are picked up at school, in a school is also a place where you have speech and language therapy, or where safeguarding concerns can be raised. So with hindsight, should we have done more to raise that more prominently the beginning? I think we did do quite a lot.

Jo Revill 27:55

But you know, there was such a huge focus on what was happening across the whole community, that you are trying to make your voice heard in quite a crowded space. And I think for our members, paediatricians, they have this extraordinary experience of working in different sectors, of suddenly being adult wards, running community clinics entirely remotely, which is incredibly difficult, and really supporting other colleagues as well. So I think the way medicine came together, and I think the way the Royal Colleges came together, was really positive, actually. And I think the work that Chris Whitty did as CMO with the other CMOS in talking to the Colleges all the way through has been fantastically important.

Fiona Fox

That's interesting. I didn't I wasn't aware of that, that you had regular sessions with him.

Jo Revill

He was asking advice, he would ask, you know, what we felt the big issues were emerging. And because from the CMO's point of view, knowing what the Colleges were seeing on the ground, and having ways of feeding up through their networks, and emerging problems, would then help them to deal with problems at an early stage.

Fiona Fox 29:12

It's really reassuring to hear that actually, isn't it, it's really reassuring to hear that he made time to make sure that he wasn't sitting, advising even even from just the data and the papers that they were doing, but that he was seeking.

Jo Revill

Well, you know, there's a long way to go still isn't there, there's a long way to go with all of this. We, you know, we're simply going to see the impact of boosters, we're going to see the impact of the continuing measures that we've got. And we've got much more data to come out around the long term effects of COVID, obviously, and we are part of global networks. So we wait to see what



comes out from other countries or potentially other variants. We obviously hope not, but, you know, it's a long way to go.

Jo Revill

Fiona, thanks so much for the time you've given us today, you could spend hours more talking about it's absolutely fascinating to hear about what you've done during the pandemic, and how you liaise with both scientists and journalists to get the story out there.

But I want to wish you a very Merry Christmas. And I also want to say the same to everyone who's tuned in, including all of our members. They have done a phenomenal job keeping children and young people safe in this period. Thank you.

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