



Dr Simon Knowles

## Science communication training day at the College

In April the first of several science communication training days was held at the College. Participants included many of the newly appointed regional and specialist society National Pathology Week Coordinators. Here, two of them reflect on what they learnt and how they hope to use their new skills to tailor events for different audiences during National Pathology Week.

Here we go again. National Pathology Week (NPW) is, relatively speaking, just around the corner and those of us who have been dobbed in as Regional Coordinators are only too aware of the task ahead of us, having experienced the NPW rollercoaster last year. We mostly, I suspect, learned by doing – whether it's popping in a venflon or organising something for local schools – which is all well and good, but it doesn't entirely scratch the itch for those pathologists unused to working professionally with kids and families and who tend to treat teenagers as adults with worse attention deficit disorder than the average SpR. So I was very pleased to find the College had laid on a day with the professionals: science communicators from the Science Museum, one of my all-time favourite places.

### What is a science communicator?

We probably need a brief digression here into the nature of science communicators. These valiant educationalist troopers are not, repeat not, just a bunch of teachers who couldn't hack it at their local secondary school. They are passionate and committed and they are as much concerned about getting across the joys of science as they are the facts. Actually more so. We were treated to two of these minor deities: Karen Davies and Andrew Dand. What we got from them was a day where we were confronted with the image of kids as skiving, conniving, insolent, sneaky young beasties who think pathology is all about *CSI* and who giggle every time you mention excretion, only to see them mysteriously morph into interested and intelligent young people keen to explore the unknown but

fascinating world of the pathological sciences. If only we get the communication right.

### Misconceptions about pathology

So why do we need to bother with science communication in the first place? And why doesn't the College get on with its 'day job', whatever that is? Well, you need to ask Suzy Lishman, but it is fair to say there are some major public misconceptions about pathology and this is all about putting these right.

Part of the problem lies with people like me: male, white, old and antisocial. In short, the archetypal scientist type that many potential recruits to the laboratory would really like not to be. The message from the Science Museum was pretty explicit on this one – draft in the younger, fitter staff to help with the message. By which they meant fit. Not fit. And here is the next catch – when I say fit, I mean healthy. If I mean attractive or sexy, then I'm probably pushing my luck by using inappropriate language and the audience is likely to think I'm talking down at them. Now, if this all putting you off the idea of participating in NPW, please read on because it shouldn't. Science communication is really good fun and one of the most satisfying and creative activities you can imagine.

### Getting your message across

So how do you make it work? Well, we learned lots about that. We also learned about learning. Actually we learned much more about learning than we did about teaching, which is how it should be. There is quite a message here: what we think is interesting is only interesting to an audience if they find it relevant. Which generally means you need a 'hook'. Sports, sex, personalities, acne and – yes – even *CSI* if you must. Some of the best hooks are activity based. Get the punters to do something. If they're teenagers, get them to do something energetic. If they are younger kids with their parents, you need to take a different tack so make sure you know your audience and target it appropriately. It struck me during the day that it might be safer to take an event out to a school, knowing the target was going to be GCSE students, say, rather than throwing open the doors of your Trust to all and sundry, hoping for the best and ending up with a mixture of OAPs and ten year olds.

### Object handling



I seem to have failed to tell you what we actually did at the College and perhaps Maesha will do a better job here. It was a great opportunity to meet some interested and interesting coordinators who seemed to cover the whole breadth of pathology, from vets to viruses. The day was very interactive and involved, amongst other things, a Victorian skirt-lifter and a doggie-fashion interaction. Don't ask. Anyway, I suspect that when you are summoned by your own Regional Coordinator to discuss events for 2009, you will get a large dose of what we did today. I'm certainly going to try to pass on this stuff to the people in my region, although it won't be with the same verve as Karen and Andrew.



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In contrast to Simon Knowles, I belong to the generation of trainees who spent a considerable length of time as a medical student in workshops and lectures dedicated to communication skills and practising breaking bad news through role play. Indeed, my fellow medical students and I grew to love writing role plays, especially scripting parts that would challenge perceptions, inject a bit of cheeky humour and reflect the diversity of our local community. On the flip side, we were told that we were expected to dress and behave so as to gain the trust of elderly patients. So here we are, a generation of iPod/iPhone toting, Granny friendly trainees with good manners to boot! Our trainers, Karen and Andrew, emphasised the importance of getting trainees involved with science communication, as we can act as tangible role models for students. Indeed, being young, enthusiastic and having great gadgets, makes us akin to youth icons and an equal match to any glamorous surgeon on TV. Through these positive perceptions, a career as a pathologist will be seen as a desirable aspiration for a young person. So, any consultants thinking about organising events, get your trainees involved, and trainees — think about organising events yourselves.

Karen and Andrew showed us that anyone can run a terrific National Pathology Week event by following these top tips:

- Brainstorm ideas about what motivates your audience. Then build your event so that it touches on these interests — this will enable your audience to feel pathology is relevant to them (for students this means clothes, the opposite sex, sport, facebook ...).
- Students no longer have to learn facts through didactic teaching at school; instead, most school lessons are interactive with activities and tasks, so it's best to emulate this within your student focused National Pathology Week activities.
- Events are always best when they are labelled with exciting titles, the cheekier and more intriguing the better!
- People are fascinated by objects commonly found within our workplaces. Object han-

dling is interactive, a fun way of finding out how things work and a good ice-breaker. What may be dull and common-place to you is often intriguing to someone who has no experience of medicine.

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• Break down the information you are giving people into small chunks. A good way of doing this is to write learning outcomes or objectives for your event – no more than three, and building your information delivery around these.

- If you run an event for young people, don't go into your event with the assumption that they will misbehave – students are bound to be excited and if you feel you are losing your audience to misbehaviour, just re-iterate the learning aims and involve their teaching staff. One tip is not to show any disrespect towards them, as this angers them and makes any potentially explosive situation worse. The calmer you are, the calmer your audience will be!
- Include feedback in the event so that the next event can be adapted as necessary.

What about families? Pretty much the same principles apply: target your audience and then target relevant material for the age group/cultural/social background you are dealing with. Also, spend time targeting information to both children and their parents.

I completely agree with Simon that the message that came across at the training day was that the most effective events are those tailored to a particular audience, and making them relevant was a central theme. Simon's last comment is the crucial issue here; we have to take responsibility for the future of our profession through public engagement activities. This means not just targeting young people, but also thinking about events that educate adult audiences about the importance of our work within society.

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