

## COMMENTARY

# Research and Publicity

Wayne L. Pines

Remember a few years ago when a story about interferon was featured on the front cover of Newsweek magazine and in virtually every newspaper and general interest magazine in the U. S.?

The drug was hailed as a potential cure for cancer and other diseases. All that needed to be done, readers were led to believe, was for the researchers to bring the drug's benefits from the lab to the clinic.

We know that while interferon has medical potential, the early promotion was premature. There is likely to be some time until interferon will have practical uses in medical practice. Those patients who believe that interferon was a panacea were, at a minimum, misled and at worst cruelly disappointed.

The premature stories on interferon are an example – one of literally dozens – of excessive promotion given to drugs still undergoing development, before their true potential and practical uses are known.

Publicity about drugs under development is not inherently bad. The public is entitled to know what new drugs are in the pipeline and how research funds are being spent. For example, there have been many times when new and legitimate uses have been found for drugs, and many people benefit from learning about their uses even before FDA officially approves them.

There are a number of reasons why publicity about drugs occurs. There are times when grants are easier to obtain for research projects that are hailed in the newspapers. Then, too, there is the natural human inclination to want to see oneself quoted in the newspaper or appear on television.

Television and newspapers, competing as never before for the public's time, seek stories that will stimulate the emotions. Reporters want to be first with stories about new and potential medical breakthroughs.

The final element in the mix is the public. Consumers have every reason to feel optimistic about medical research. Within our own lifetimes, diseases that once were crippling or fatal have been conquered with "magic bullets". Medical research has shown it can produce miracles, and people want to believe – and hope.

In my view, however, the public is not well served when unbalanced premature promotion occurs. The public is prepared to believe anything and everything about medical

research's potential. People with diseases want to believe that cures are just around the corner – even when they are not.

When I was at the Food and Drug Administration, we made a special effort to keep research advances in perspective. We issued press releases on new drug approvals only when they represented true therapeutic advances. We explained carefully not only a drug's potential benefits but also its likely risks. The FDA Drug Bulletin was created to put drug use into proper perspective for the health professional. Now, in counselling with pharmaceutical clients, I seek to be sure that balance is maintained in all publicity efforts.

The pharmaceutical research community has a critical role and special responsibility for addressing this issue. If anyone is capable of helping the public avoid confusion about what current medical research can, and cannot, accomplish, it is those people who are actually doing the work.

Publicity about research now occurs largely on an ad hoc basis, without any standard or guidelines for researchers to follow. Researchers often find themselves at the mercy of the media.

I am not suggesting that researchers stop talking to the media, or that an effort be made to eliminate all research stories. Publicity can be beneficial when done correctly.

What I would like to see is an organized, systematic process by the research community to address this question. A dialogue is needed on how the public perceives medical research, and whether a code or advisory guidelines are needed for those who don't know how to handle publicity.

Such a code would have to contain a number of elements, such as:

- Statements on drug research which make clear the stage of development and how long it will take for the product to have practical application.
- Statements which make clear that all risks about a drug cannot be known until after more research and testing have been completed.
- The potential limitations of the drug should be described, to the extent known.

The issue does not yet threaten to shatter the foundations of the research community's credibility. But if left unchecked, excessive premature promotion has the potential to do damage to that credibility. It is a nagging issue that merits attention and thought.

We live today in a world of instant mass communications. Major stories are condensed into 30 seconds or less. Most times, the public has a misleading or superficial understanding of reality.

This will not change. What can change, though, is the accuracy and balance of new stories about medical research. And who is in a better position to help set the standards than members of the research community?

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