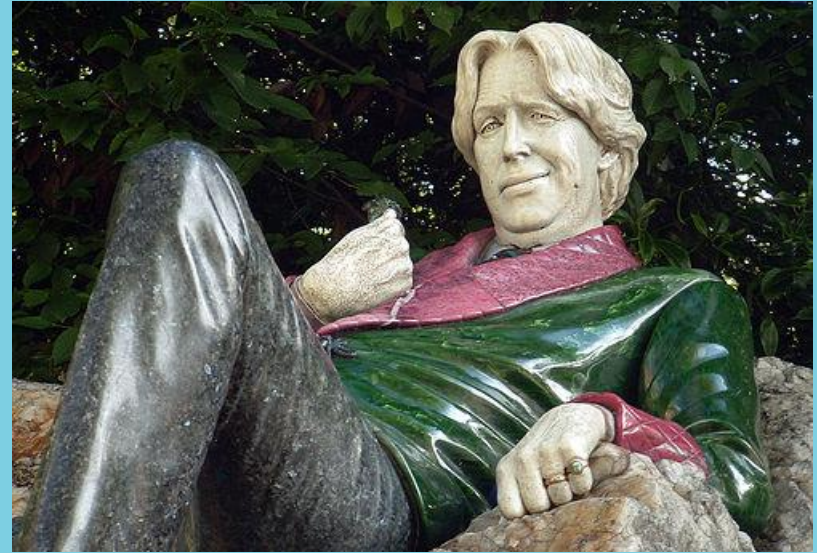


Inconvenient messages concerning the practice of biomedical science or

‘The Importance of Being Honest’

Fred Balvert, Science Communicator
Communications Dept. Erasmus MC

'The Importance of Being Earnest'



- Oscar Wilde (1854 – 1900)
- Main character: Jack or Ernest ?
- Comfortable little lie
- Cause of confusion
- Center of the plot

Dissonance!

Openness and transparency

- To establish and maintain trust
- Do we keep to the policy ?
- Or are we overruled by organizational reflexes?

Cases

- Calamity in patient care
- Animal research
- Technology transfer

Erasmus MC University Medical Center Rotterdam

- Patient care
- Research
- Education

> 13.000 employees



2003 Kidnapping

- February, Sunday, 10.30 hrs
- Baby is taken from Children's hospital
- Police informs public transport / cab drivers
- Regional radio picks up news
- 11.00 hrs child is found
- National media are underway



Guide lines for response to media

Phase 1

(on the phone at home and in car)

- At 10.30 I was informed that ..
- I am going to find out more now
- You will receive more info soon
- I must get to work now
- Do not speculate

Guide lines for response to media

Phase 2

(in the Children's Hospital)

- What we know now is ..
 - Our concern is with the people involved
 - Thanks to the teamwork of police, media, hospital ..
 - Inform specific relation groups
-
- It is OUR problem
 - Stick together
 - Avoid idea of 'us and them'

Our evaluation

- Hospital organization: Stricter following of procedures: human factor
 - Not much we could do at the moment
 - Openness was appreciated by parents and media
 - 'At time of great uncertainty, you must be there'
- Do not isolate the organization from the rest of society

Animal Research in The Netherlands

- Needed for progress in biomedical science
- Place in a continuum:
 - In vitro
 - In vivo
 - Animals
 - Patients
 - In silico
 - Population studies
- Strict regulations for safety and animal welfare
- 3 R's:
 - Reduction
 - Refinement
 - Replacement

About our communication policy

- 2001 Animal Liberation Front steals 5 mice and 2 rats
- 2003 Erasmus MC policy 'Communication of Animal Research':
 - Re-active to pro-active
 - Qualified spokespeople handle the media
 - Publicly position animal research: press releases, exhibitions
 - Societal, medical context
 - Participate in dialogue: debates, lectures
- 2008 National code openness Animal Research:
 - Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences
 - Association of Universities
 - Federation of university medical centers

Activist rhetoric

- Take initiative
- Confrontation
- Intimidation
- Successful

Erasmus MC approach



- Pro-active
- Open dialogue
- Education
- Successful

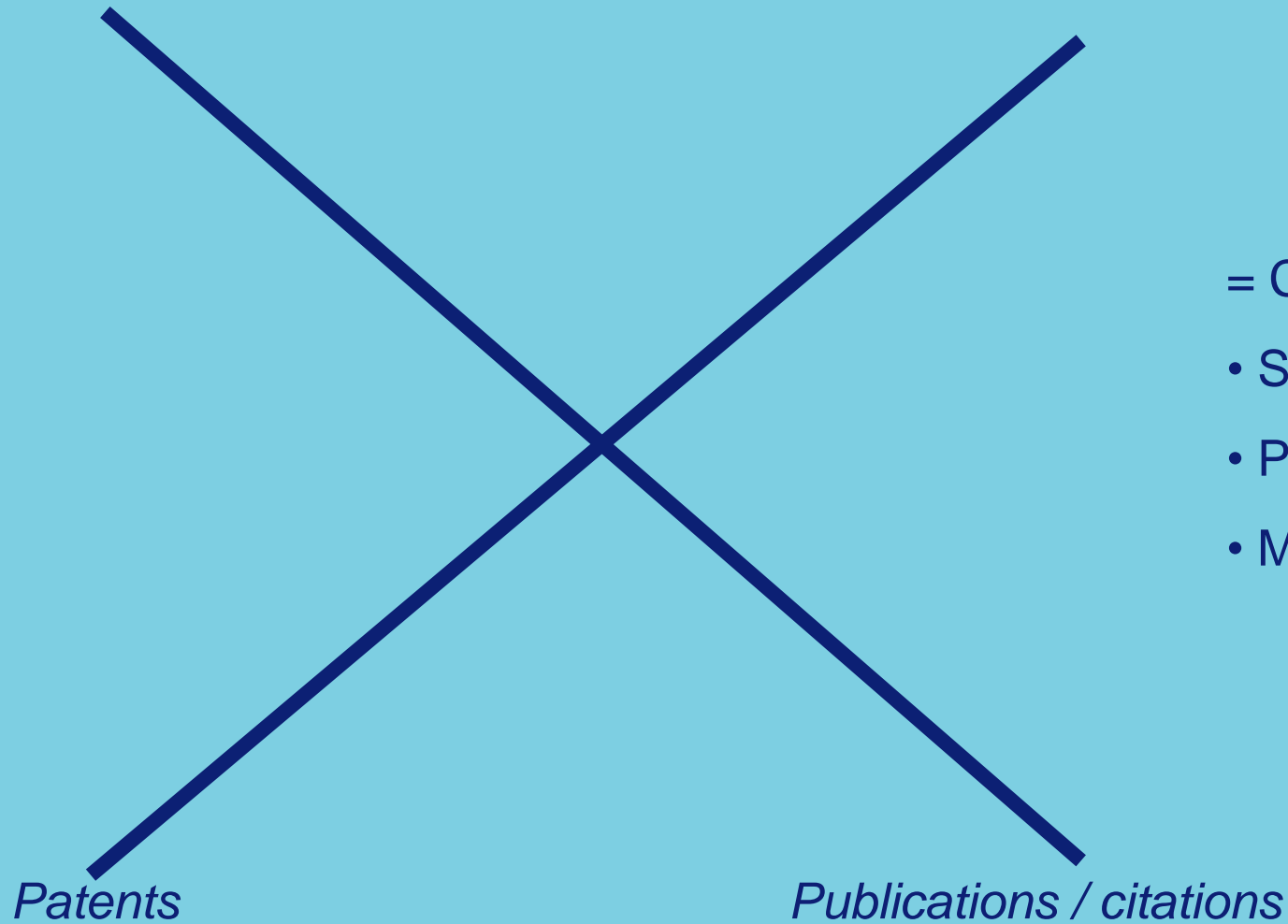
Not an 'us and them' game



November, 2009

Issues in communication of research II

Technology Transfer



= Culture:

- Scientists
- Public
- Media

Culture is communication

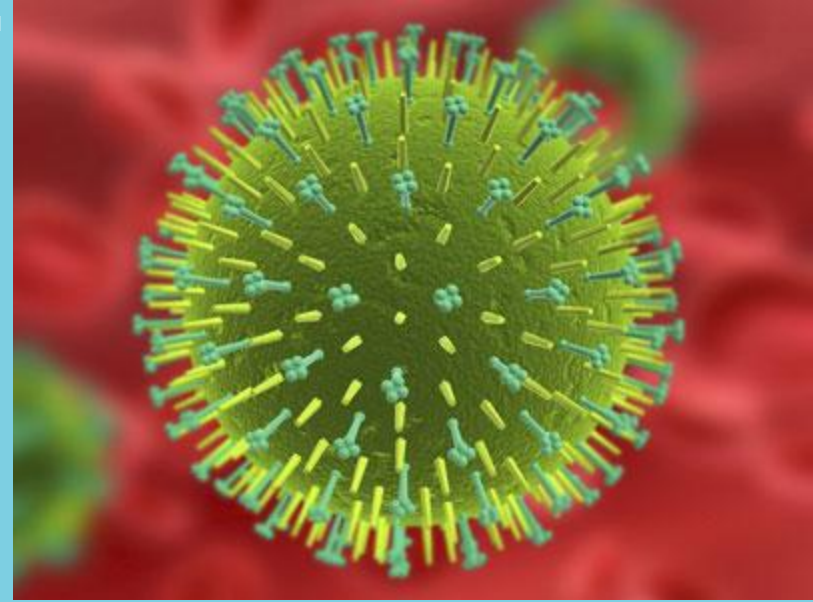


- Erasmus MC: Internal change of culture
- National government: Technology Transfer Policy
- Both: facilities, grants, support, share arrangements
- Transparency is key

Culture is communication II

- But what about the media and the public ?
- We have got something to explain
- No external public presentations at all
- Incidental press releases give a fragmented view
- And raise more questions
- Critical questions by media trigger defense

And yes



- 2009: Swine flu
- Erasmus MC top virologist takes lead in advice
- Span of pandemic takes too long for media
- Public panic changes into indignation
- Erasmus MC share arrangement is mistaken for industrial interest
- Insinuations are made about a conflict of interests
- Communication becomes damage control

Lessons

- In this case it has become ‘us against them’
- We should be more transparent
- We should communicate more open

In short

- We need trust
 - For public, political and economical support
 - To attract young people for a career in biomedical science
 - To bridge the gap of understanding between science and society
 - We are never finished explaining our role in society
 - Also about inconvenient issues concerning the practice of research
- No isolation of biomedical research from society and democratic policy process
- No hide and seek game
- Content for dialogue and educational programs

Thank you very much for your attention !

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