

### WHOSE INFORMATION IS IT ANYWAY?

#### Report of a workshop at the 33rd Annual Scientific Meeting of the Society for Social Medicine Conference, Manchester, September 1989

Although there was stiff competition for the afternoon's entertainment in the way of enticing trips out, this workshop, jointly organised by Radical Community Medicine and Radical Statistics was well attended, with more than 30 participants.

There were three short introductory talks. Claudia Martin spoke first about her experience in working at the Research Unit for Health and Behaviourial Change in Edinburgh. She described the extreme intervention from the Scottish Office, one of the Unit's main funders, in attempting to suppress the publicising of politically unwelcome research findings. This intervention eventually influenced Claudia's decision to leave the Unit.

Nick Mays spoke on recent changes in the contract which researchers sign when undertaking work for the Departments of Health and Social Security (see the document in this edition of the Newsletter). The contract now states that permission to publish research findings can be withheld: researchers no longer have an automatic right to publish their work. Assurances have been given that consent to publication would not be "unreasonably withheld". But Nick suggested that even the possibility will encourage a form of "censorship", both overt and covert, since no one would want to undertake work that may be too controversial to obtain the funding body's imprimatur. He warned that the credibility of any DoH or DSS funded research might be threatened, and that if queries did arise over publication, the only recourse could be judicial review. All those interested in the work of the Association of DoH and DSS-funded Researchers should contact Nick, through the Radical Community Medicine contact address.

Eric Brunner, who until recently worked at the London Food Commission and is now working freelance on health related issues, then talked about some of his experiences with the media. He stressed the necessity for researchers to make good use to the press and TV if research is to influence policy. It was generally acknowledged in discussion of Eric's contribution that this was a skill many researchers lack.

The workshop then broke into smaller groups to discuss practical ways of tackling these problems. Although doom and gloom prevailed at the beginning of the workshop sessions, eventually a range of strategies emerged.

#### Proposals from the small group discussions:

1. People wishing to do research on health related questions should apply more often to the Locally Organised Research Schemes (LORS). This money is not limited to strictly clinical research such as drug trials, as is widely believed. This might allow for more locally relevant and locally initiated health research.

2. We can find ways to "work the system" so as to meet the requirements of funding bodies as well as making politically sensitive findings available for public information and debate, if necessary by publishing in some of the less obvious places. Participants felt there were good precedents for this.
3. We should encourage large and eminent bodies (the Society for Social Medicine, the Faculty of Public Health of the RCP, etc, etc) to be vociferous in their opposition to political interference in funding and publicising health research.
4. We need to find out more about the means by which research priorities are currently decided. At what stage are decisions made on what to fund? How are funds channelled into some departments or research units rather than others? We are a long way from the ideal of communities defining their own research priorities, but at least there should be some public accountability involved in the process, which at present seems to take the form of a clash between elites.
5. We need to resist the privatisation of public health research where contracts are given to management consultancies. These may not be best placed to give a sufficiently independent, critical, creative (or long-winded) answer to a question. Do such consultancies have the consumer or health service user or their own shareholders in mind when they give their answers to their own customers?
6. We need to be wary in undertaking research, especially if in conjunction with consultancies. We need to know the terms and conditions of contracts which must specify who owns the products of any research and who writes crucial reports, that is, to what extent researchers will have an opportunity to influence policy makers.

The afternoon ended with a video of the Channel 4 Dispatches programme on official statistics, made with the help of the Radical Statistics Group. Overall the workshop was a success, helping people to come up with ideas and to exchange useful information. But it was difficult to break free of an atmosphere of worry, and a certain sense of powerlessness, especially as the abrupt removal of funding from the Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyle Survey had just occurred.

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