Devon, UK

jessicapowell.freelance@gmail.com

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CHRISTMAS 2020: DR KILDARE

Meet the medical media faces of the pandemic

They're beamed into living rooms on a weekly basis to try to help the public decipher the ever changing picture of the pandemic. So, what does it feel like to be one of the press's go-to covid-19 commentators?

Jessica Powell *journalist*

"R numbers," "flattening the curve"—if you'd asked the public what these terms meant a year ago, you'd most likely have drawn a blank. But now they're as much a part of British conversation as the weather.

But as press coverage has been flooded with medical lingo, complex data, and many, many graphs (including the infamous "next slide, please" debacle), confusion has crept in. That's where a dedicated

group of medical experts—who've spoken to the press week in, week out in a bid to strip out the jargon and guide the public through advances and advice—have come in.

So, what's it been like behind the scenes? *The BMJ* spoke to some of those familiar faces to find out.

We need more women in science on TV

Christina Pagel is professor of operational research at UCL and director of the UCL Clinical Operational Research Unit. She's regularly been called on by

Channel 4, Sky, and the BBC and does a weekly briefing through Independent SAGE

"It's been a baptism of fire talking to the press during the pandemic. I've never done it before, but now I'm

on the TV or radio sometimes four or five times a week. Before all this, I was like, ‘Why would anyone want to talk to me?’ But then I saw people on TV who really didn’t know what they were talking about, saying things that were wrong or dangerous. And I thought, ‘At least I’m not going to do that.’

“Operational research is a branch of applied mathematics and I’m often asked to make sense of data for the public. It’s important to explain what the data are showing but also what they’re not showing—what we don’t know.

“The difficulty with covid-19 is that it’s not dangerous enough to really scare people but it is dangerous enough to kill a lot of people. If this was Ebola, no one would be wanting to go to the pub.

“Many people deny how serious covid-19 is and think if we didn’t have these restrictions, life would be normal. But living in a world where a virus is rampaging isn’t a normal world. There isn’t some magic bullet that’s going to make it go away. It sucks. But I feel strongly that pretending something is better than it is isn’t helpful.

“One thing that’s frustrated me about the media coverage is the narrative of lockdown versus herd immunity. It’s a fringe idea but presented as an alternative. There is a way to control covid-19 that avoids lockdown, but the countries that have succeeded have done it with good border control and contact tracing.

“My advice if you’re approached about speaking to the media is to say yes. Especially women. Women tend to set a higher bar for themselves before considering themselves expert enough. But women in science on the TV or radio are positive role models.

“You have to be quite responsive—I often get asked to go on a show a couple of hours before it’s live. Write down the points you want to make in case you get flustered. And avoid jargon. Think, ‘Would my mum understand this?’ Unless your mum is a leading doctor—then pick someone else.”

Talking on TV is like walking a tightrope

Chris Smith is a medical consultant specialising in clinical microbiology and virology at Cambridge University, as well as founder of the Naked Scientists, which has a BBC radio programme. During the pandemic, he's been a go-to expert for the press and answered the public's covid-19 questions on BBC 5Live's *Colin Murray's Coronavirus Call-In*.

"Never in the history of broadcasting have we had so much airtime devoted to a virus. As a virologist and broadcaster, I've had about 20 years to practise for this moment. During the pandemic, I've worked on broadcasts not just in the UK but also Australia, China, and New Zealand. So, it's been a horrible time but an exhilarating time, too."

“When all this began, BBC 5Live rang and said, ‘There’s no sport, so how about we do a coronavirus programme?’ People were tuning in on a Saturday expecting to hear football and they got me and Colin Murray talking about covid-19. But some of those shows took 500 phone calls. I’m proud of them.

“One thing I don’t like about media coverage of the virus is some journalists constantly going for the political angle. The political climate we’ve created in the UK makes it very hard for the government to react to new information without it coming over as a sign of weakness or doing a u turn.

“As a society we ought to be more understanding that knowledge changes. We should be encouraging people to change their minds in response, not castigating them.

“Talking on TV is, I imagine, a bit like walking a tightrope. When you’re staring down your webcam lens and you think, ‘There are millions of people looking at me,’ you just have to not look down.

“People get nervous about talking to the press. But most journalists are incredibly grateful for support. They’re not out to trap you. And doctors should remember they’re good at talking to the public because it’s what they spend their lives doing. They’ve already got the skills.”

Engaging in the blame game is damaging

Linda Bauld is professor of public health at the University of Edinburgh. She's a regular contributor on radio and TV, particularly in Scotland, and has been called on by the likes of the *Times* and the BBC during the pandemic

"For women, in particular, the social media environment is toxic. I get nasty messages after I appear in the media, but it's best to ignore it. We have a serious job to do.

"I'm a behavioural scientist, so I often talk about how the public understand the evidence around coronavirus and how they interpret what they're being asked to do.

"I've seen a narrative developing about blaming the public for the spread of the virus and that's very damaging. There's been a lot of finger pointing at young people. And when the testing system was overstretched the line was, 'Who are all these people getting a test when they don't need one?' But the government had been saying for months that if you think you've got symptoms, get a test. I've tried to communicate if you want to motivate behaviour change, don't engage in the blame game. It's totally ineffective.

"There's definitely a sense of responsibility that comes with talking to the press. But I haven't felt stressed by that, just exhausted. Here in Scotland there's not that many academics engaging with the

press so it's very time consuming, continually reading new studies, keeping up with the latest statistics, and preparing for interviews.

"I'd encourage more clinically qualified experts to step up—the public trusts them. But it's also good to recognise your boundaries. I've realised I just can't do late night TV. And some people are good

at writing, others are better oral communicators, so work to your strengths."

One thing that's missing from a lot of the coverage is candour

Mark Porter is an NHS GP and through his roles as anchor of BBC Radio 4's *Inside Health*, medical correspondent at the *Times*, and

columnist for *Saga Magazine* he's been tackling the nation's coronavirus concerns.

“There’s been a celebration of science during the pandemic which has been great to watch. We’ve heard lots of new voices in the media—men and women from across the country—talking about their work, whether it be epidemiology, virology, or intensive care. They’ve given some amazing interviews.

“As a GP, I’m not an expert in covid-19. But I see my role in the media to be a conduit—getting the right information from the right experts. Plus, among my patients I’ve got old, young, media sceptics, medical sceptics, and every political view. They ask me what they often think are stupid questions, but their concerns reflect the nation’s, so I put those ‘stupid’ questions to the experts.

“One thing missing from a lot of coverage, including from experts, is candour. It’s all right to say, ‘I don’t know.’ If you’re put on the spot, never wing it.

“It’s confusing for the public listening to debates around covid-19. There are naysayers, doomsdayers, and there’s the politics involved. I try to keep my message simple: what happens over the next few months will be determined by you and your community. If you’re sensible, we’ll get through this. If not, no amount of central policy is going to work. The power is with the individual.”

Competing interests: I have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.