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The BMJ Awards 2021: Special recognition award for science communication

Covid-19 is complex and has often been confusing for the public, but during a period of extended uncertainty two voices have provided clarity, says **Helen Jones**: Devi Sridhar and Christina Pagel, who have received this special award for their courage in communicating evidence on policy during the pandemic

Helen Jones *freelance journalist*

Devi Sridhar

Throughout the pandemic, Devi Sridhar, professor of global public health at the University of Edinburgh, has advised Scottish and UK governmental covid-19 committees and made regular media appearances to explain the scientific issues to the public. She describes the experience as "surreal" and says, "In my normal academic life, if I did any media interviews it would be very niche. It wasn't mass media. I do get very positive responses and have flowers delivered . . . and various proposals, which make me chuckle, but there is also the flip side. Social media is toxic for anyone in the public eye, particularly if you [are] talking about restrictions, masks and vaccines, which are very emotive topics."

Sridhar has gained a reputation for straight talking, telling a House of Commons committee in November 2020, "The problem right now is that people emotionally want to hear reassuring messages. They wanted to hear over the summer that there would be no second wave, and they want to hear now that Christmas will be normal. I have to speak bluntly. The virus does not care if it is Christmas. We still have pretty high prevalence across the country. It is risky for people to mix indoors, with alcohol, with elderly relatives at this point in time."

She says her role is to keep saying what she thinks and to provide some clarity for people who are confused. "I think people want certainty and want to know what the future holds, whether that's politicians or businesses. They want scientists to be oracles. We can provide contours or scenarios, but we can't say with certainty how things will evolve." She adds that one of the difficulties is that as new data emerge the strategy changes, and that is often depicted as a U-turn. "It is a challenge. People are watching science in action. I have to be honest and say to them, 'I could get it wrong, I'm not perfect, but based on the data I'm seeing and the conversations I'm having with colleagues, this is what I think is happening.'"

With the rollout of vaccines, Sridhar is optimistic about the months ahead. "We know that vaccines provide pretty effective coverage. People will get covid-19 and will be unwell with it but are not likely to go to hospital with it or die from it." She hopes that covid-19 will transform into a manageable health issue in wealthy countries but is pessimistic about poorer countries and the vaccine challenges they face. Her message to the public remains to get double jabbed, to keep wearing a mask in public settings and on crowded transport, to be mindful of social distancing, and to have empathy for others.

She says that some important lessons have emerged during the pandemic. "It's better to over-react and to move early. Testing and diagnostic capacity are crucial—you have to be able to identify cases, even for surveillance to understand where you are and be able to plan." Crucially, she says science is "amazing," and what has been learnt from recovery trials, testing, and the development of vaccines "can be applied to other sorts of health challenges." Sridhar is part of the "100 days mission," which aims to reduce the impact of future pandemics by making diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines available within 100 days. "We need to make things faster," she says.

Christina Pagel

"Covid-19 has taken over my life," says Christina Pagel, professor of operational research at University College London, where she applies operational research, data analysis, and mathematical modelling to problems in healthcare. "I probably spend two to three days a week doing Independent SAGE related work, whether that is preparing weekly briefings on the numbers, working with Independent SAGE on reports, talking to the press, or doing TV interviews in the UK and internationally. I also do a lot of tweet threads to try and explain scientific papers, data, and the latest news. An in-depth tweet thread can take me several hours to do on top of my normal day job, which hasn't gone away."

She says the hardest thing about the pandemic has been "watching it unfold in a way that it didn't need to and things going badly wrong." She adds, "I could see what was happening in December, and I spent a lot of time in the run up to Christmas on the news saying we can't keep going like this. I have a lot of friends who work in intensive care, and by January they were having the worst time of their lives. I felt that there was nothing that I could do except to try and explain the facts to people."

Explaining the facts and urging caution over hosting the Euro final at Wembley and opening up foreign travel, for example, led to Pagel being described by some as a "doom monger." She says she wasn't surprised at the general lack of understanding of science and statistics in the first wave of covid but

admits she was surprised that, during the second and third waves, people—including politicians—still didn't understand how exponential growth works. "It has made me realise that people look at the evidence and see what they want to see. So, for instance, if you really want to open up the country, if the cases are going up, then you use death stats because they are a lagging indicator. I am aware that what I believe can affect how I look at the evidence. Everyone comes with a point of view, so I constantly check myself and ask, 'What am I missing? What is the opposite view?' A lot of people say I am the voice of doom, but I do try to say these are the things we can try to make the situation better."

She adds that there is a really positive outcome from the pandemic. "There are so many brilliant, articulate women scientists out there—Sarah Gilbert, Susan Michie, Trish Greenhalgh, and Devi Sridhar, to name a few—and it has helped to change public perceptions of scientists." She adds that on a purely intellectual level it has been a really interesting period. "I have learnt so much from other experts about public health, behavioural science, virology, and vaccines. It's been fascinating and I've really enjoyed the challenge of asking myself how I can explain it to other people and try to de-jargon it.

"One of the things I hated at the beginning of covid-19 was a feeling of helplessness. I felt like I couldn't do anything to help. Now I have found a role and can do something useful for other people."

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