



FEATURE

CDC tightens controls on scientists' communication with news media

Peter Doshi *associate editor, The BMJ*

The requirement for all information to be vetted could undermine scientific openness, reports Peter Doshi

Questions have been raised about top-down efforts to constrain scientists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A CDC directive instituted quietly last summer requires all correspondence with the news media, no matter how basic an inquiry, to be cleared through its communications office in Atlanta. The existence of the directive was first reported by the media company Axios in September,^{1,2} but a freedom of information request by *The BMJ* has provided new details.

The newly released emails show that all requests from the news media, “even requests asking for data that is online,” now have to be cleared centrally.

Kathryn Harben, chief of the CDC’s central news media branch, announced the protocol in an email to colleagues on 28 August: “We will also begin clearing ALL requests from media for interviews and CDC information. In short, if there’s a chance that information in a news story will be attributed to CDC [through a quote or paraphrase of a subject matter expert or spokesperson], it will need to come to NMB [news media branch] for review/clear through CDC and HHS [Department of Health and Human Services, CDC’s parent agency] leadership.”

CDC’s 2011 media policy already required all queries from reporters to be referred to CDC’s media relations team (see data supplement on bmj.com). But the 2011 policy specifically states that “clearance is not the main reason for referral.” The practice instituted last summer therefore appears to be a tightening of the rules and to further constrain agency scientists.

According to one press officer’s notes, the Division of Public Affairs director, Michelle Bonds, “acknowledge[s] that some requests come back with the guidance to ‘stick to the data’ and said that we’ll need to get better at focusing our SMEs [subject matter experts] on talking about just what the initial request was and not venturing into other topics.”

Media control

When word of the CDC’s new process first received public attention, health reporters expressed alarm.

Investigative journalist Charles Ornstein of ProPublica called the clearance requirement “genuinely disturbing ... The idea that someone at CDC headquarters needs to sign off on

responses to basic data requests shows a level of media control beyond which I have ever seen. What’s next?”²

Long time observers of federal agency media policies may also be equally alarmed. In 2008, the Union of Concerned Scientists assessed 15 federal regulatory and science agencies, and gave the CDC an “A” grade for setting “a high standard ... that value scientific openness.”⁴

The emails released to *The BMJ* show that not all CDC units accepted the latest orders. Charles Rothwell, director of the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), responded, “I am not worried about it... we will respond to straight data requests as always and let [Atlanta] know. However, any interview or leading questions—then that needs approval.”

Rothwell told *The BMJ* that from his perspective, it is a non-issue, the result of a misunderstanding, and said that NCHS procedures for dealing with the media have not changed in years. “There has been no change. There has been nothing that says that CDC or any part of the department wants to review our publications before we come out, or not to provide data that’s already public and made available, that type of thing.”

At the same time, he cautioned that “NCHS is a very different organization than anything else in CDC.” As a federal statistical agency,⁵ NCHS has special authority to release statistical information without prior clearance. “We do have protections. Other agencies do not.”

CDC confirmed that the clearance requirement is still in effect. “We have always cleared media requests through appropriate channels through our program press offices, then through CDC’s Office of the Associate Director for Communication [OADC], then through HHS,” said Bertram Kelly of the news media branch.

“Nothing in this process restricts employees from communicating with the public, but messages do have to be reviewed by the OADC and HHS.”

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

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- 1 Baker S. CDC cracks down on its communications staff. *Axios* 2017 Sep 12. <https://www.axios.com/newsletters/axios-vitals-410ce6a5-1566-47bc-b9f5-6fc4e9091fdc.html?chunk=4#story4>
- 2 Pixabay V. CDC official sends troubling message to employees about media questions. *Columbia Journalism Review* 2017 Sep 13. https://www.cjr.org/covering_the_health_care_fight/cdc-health-reporters-journalism.php
- 4 Union of Concerned Scientists. Freedom to speak? A report card on federal agency media policies. 2008. https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/legacy/assets/documents/scientific_integrity/Freedom-to-Speak.pdf
- 5 CDC. Statement of commitment to scientific integrity by principal statistical agencies. 2017 <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/integrity.htm>

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