



Saturday, 14 October 2023

Last year, the Fast Forward #3 conference titled “Better Health Communication” was held in Rome. Immediately afterwards, we as the scientific committee thought it would be a good idea to talk more about how we communicate science, sharing research aims and results. It was 14 October 2022, and just one year later we proudly celebrated the first Italian edition (and the first outside the United States) of the “Medicine in The Media” meeting, born from the foresight and intellectual generosity of Lisa Schwartz and Steven Woloshin, from Dartmouth University. The meeting has been held under the patronage of the EASE Italian Chapter.

Opening the meeting, Marina Davoli and Antonio Addis (Department of epidemiology, Rome) pointed out that health sciences continue to question the value of health interventions: they should be fair, reasonable, appropriate and acceptable for whom they are intended, whether it is exercising or taking a statin. However, according to an extensive empirical survey of Cochrane reviews, only 10 per cent of interventions are based on high quality evidence supporting the primary outcome, and we also know that 85 per cent of biomedical research wastes resources, i.e. brings neither progress nor value. So, communicating science often means accepting uncertainty as an integral part of communication: if we want to communicate honestly and fairly, we must mediate between complexity and simplify without trivializing.

People working in science communication suffer the shortage or even lack of useful information due to bad research and publication bias. On the other hand, the imbalance between hype and hope often characterises science and health communication. The Florence meeting has been an opportunity to discuss the complexity of medical research and the ways to share its methods and results with a wide non specialistic audience.

Karsten Jorgesten (Cochrane, Denmark) recalled how, in the face of the overabundance of treatments with no real net benefit, choosing not to act medically can be more difficult than being seduced by the bias of action. Deborah Cohen (former The BMJ investigative journalist) emphasised the ethical necessity (and courage) to resist the journalistic demands of hasty and inaccurate reporting, driven by economic needs, visibility and space, but not by quality evidence. Ioana Cristea (Stanford Metrics and Padua University) talked about fraud and falsification in biomedical research, which is far from infrequent. Jennifer Dawd (Oxford University) explained how it is possible to use social media - defined by many people during the pandemic as a vehicle of disinformation - as a valuable resource to disseminate verified information to the population. Luca De Fiore (Il Pensiero Scientifico Editore and EASE Italian chapter) suggested an unbiased approach to innovations such as Chat-GPT, while recommending careful evaluation. Argenis Ibanez (Think2it) pointed out that even images, not just numbers or words, need attention, because behind the choice of certain images (e.g. those of suffering children from LMIC used to illustrate humanitarian awareness campaigns) under the guise of a good intention, an implicit deprivation of rights, including the right to respect for dignity, may be concealed. And finally, Steven Woloshin (Dartmouth University) recalled that an untested scientific message can cause as much harm to people as an untested treatment. The pandemic was a recent example of this.

Closing the meeting, Camilla Alderighi (Alessandro Liberati Association, Firenze) recognised that seeking value in health production and communication is not easy. Anyway, we must persevere not only to suggest that better health communication is possible, but also to show young people entering the profession that there is an alternative to mainstream communication.

This event was held in-person in Florence, Italy, conceived and organised by Antonio Addis, Camilla Alderighi, Fabio Ambrosino, Luca De Fiore, Rebecca De Fiore, Raffaele Rasoini, Steven Woloshin for Il Pensiero Scientifico Editore, ProMIS and LSF. Under the patronage of: Associazione Alessandro Liberati – Cochrane Affiliate Center and the European Association of Science Editors, Italian Chapter.