Dissemination and Public engagement

The Medical Research Foundation (MRF) and the Medical Research Council (MRC), as well as the PsySTAR Director and Board, are strongly committed to public engagement with science, and place great importance on public education about mental illness and reducing its stigma.

Currently the mental health research community does not engage with the public and the media as actively as other areas of medical research, such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes etc. Mental health researchers need to understand the importance of proactively seeking engagement with the public, policy makers and the media and to be confident in communicating with a wide range of stakeholders. Interacting with the public and the media gives a valuable opportunity to provide a better informed narrative about mental health problems and to advocate for those who commit to funding research in these areas. This is likely to play a role in increasing understanding of mental illness and reducing the prejudice and discrimination often aimed at sufferers.

We will very actively encourage and support trainees to develop detailed plans and well-honed presentation skills for public engagement and dissemination of results. PsySTAR fellows will be required to outline a dissemination plan – including both scientific and lay summaries – as part of their thesis defence interview. PhD supervisors will thereby be made aware that this is an important part of the PsySTAR training experience and that they should support these activities.

Scientific dissemination

PsySTAR will be promoted by the Board members and Supervisors at every opportunity, including national and international psychiatry and related academic meetings, to promote this prestigious scheme, to advertise for applicants, and to provide regular progress reports. This will demonstrate our clear commitment to communicating and to advocacy of the role of the MRF/MRC.

During their PhD, trainees will make regular peer presentations, review their progress at annual PhD panel meetings, and will be expected to give talks at national and international research meetings. Regular slots will be available at the six monthly meetings of the Scottish Society for Experimental Medicine. Support for preparing and rehearsing these talks will be available from peers, supervisors and the Board, as required.

Summary research findings will be conveyed through conference presentations at leading national and international meetings, as well as peer reviewed publication of primary material, position papers and reviews.

Public engagement plans

Many PsySTAR supervisors regularly speak to public meetings and the media on psychiatric and related scientific issues, having contributed to MRC, Wellcome and many other initiatives over many years, and we shall train our fellows to do the same. We shall participate enthusiastically in relevant initiatives in life sciences including: Café Scientifique (http://cafescientifique.org), the Beltane ‘Beacon for Public Engagement’ in Scotland (www.rcuk.ac.uk/sis/beacons.htm), and the ESRC Innogen Centre (www.innogen.ac.uk), which are supported by the UK Funding Councils and the Wellcome Trust. Opportunities will also arise for public engagement through Edinburgh’s International Science Festival (www.sciencefestival.co.uk), and a neuroscience stream (‘Reel science’) at the
Edinburgh International Film Festival. The Scottish Mental Health Research Network (SMHRN) habitually sponsors meetings with participants and carers about the results of studies around the country.

PsySTAR will therefore have a vigorous Public Engagement programme, as do all the participating PsySTAR universities and research centres. We will particularly emphasise the benefits to society of a forward looking, science based, psychiatry training programme that will deliver high quality academics and in turn novel therapies and therapeutics. This we think will contribute to destigmatising mental illness and promote the valuable work of the Medical Research Foundation and the Medical Research Council.

PsySTAR trainees will be expected to commit to developing skills for communicating with the public/media throughout the project. They will be required to write a lay summary for the web-page to disseminate their ideas and later their findings to a wider audience. We will include Public Education activities throughout the scheme, invite suitable speakers to come and talk to the students at our meetings and during summer schools, and organise sessions for PhDs to present to both scientific and lay audiences at the SMHRN annual scientific meeting and other events.

All of our trainees will receive media training at the Universities’ press offices, through the Royal College of Psychiatrists and/or the Science Media Centre (SMC) in London (www.sciencemediacentre.org), so that they feel comfortable engaging with mainstream media from all over the UK to demystify science and transmit a clear message about societal benefits.

Science Media Centre involvement

We are fortunate to have close links with the Science Media Centre (SMC) (Web: www.sciencemediacentre.org) in London and in particular with Dr Claire Bithell, who is Head of Mental Health at the SMC (email: claire@sciencemediacentre.org). The SMC is an independent venture, with over 80 supporters, including the SMHRN, working to promote the views of the scientific community to the news media when science is in the headlines.

The Science Media Centre has kindly offered to provide the following support:

- A workshop for the fellows in their first year – where the principles for dealing with the media will be laid out, putting the case for engagement, discussing various ways to communicate and to engage the public (blogs/social media/web/schools lectures/festivals etc), giving some appreciation of how the media works, so that trainees can identify the media management skills they will need to build up and how to develop these

- During year two of the PhD, attendance at a SMC press briefing to see journalists in action

- In the third year, the SMC will help to organise a workshop to enhance media skills (e.g. mock interviews), with hands-on media training with a professional media trainer and camera/media kit (including how to prepare for a ‘Paxman’ interview)

- As the PhDs come to an end, to help the PsySTAR Board and SMHRN organise and publicise an open day where service users, carers, journalists, scientists and members of the public are invited to hear the PhD students present their projects in lay language. This could be linked with other events such organised by the SMHRN.