

# **A Guide to Working with the Media**

*University of Iowa Office of Health Science Relations, 335-8037  
Joint Office for Marketing and Communications, 356-3945*

## **Why Work with the News Media**

News coverage about the University of Iowa helps others learn about your projects or accomplishments and creates support for your missions. Letting others know about the good things that you're doing also contributes to the reservoir of goodwill that exists among Iowans, alumni and friends. That translates into support that strengthens our ability to accomplish our missions of teaching, research and service.

There is no more efficient way to communicate your accomplishments to the general public than through the news media. Of course, as a public institution, we have an obligation to share information with the public, in good times and in bad. But for the most part, the UI—including individual faculty members, researchers, staff and students—and our programs all benefit from working with the news media.

Working with the media can pay dividends in many ways:

- People who would benefit from support programs, educational opportunities or advances in medical care can take advantage of these new services;
- Publicity may lead to productive collaboration, both within and outside of the University, which is an essential component of many scientific advancements or program success;
- Any time a research story appears, there's a chance that alumni and other contributors, venture capitalists and government agencies may want to know more about your project and how they can contribute;
- Your family, friends and colleagues will read about you.

Most of your interviews with the news media will be easy and enjoyable because you have interesting information or special knowledge to share with the public. This guide provides information about how the media operate and how the UI Office of Health Science Relations (HSR) and the Joint Office for Marketing and Communications (JOMC) can help you ensure that the news is accurate, balanced and complete.

## **Health Science Relations**

Health Science Relations is responsible for communicating and publicizing, both internally and externally, the efforts of the UI health science colleges. The Joint Office for Marketing and Communications provides communications for UI Hospitals and Clinics. These two offices collaborate to cover UI health and medical news. HSR covers basic science and clinical research, student education, and certain patient care stories. JOMC generally covers patient care and hospital-related stories and produces such publications as *Pacemaker*.

However, if you are uncertain which office should handle your story, either office can coordinate or refer your inquiry as appropriate.

JOMC and HSR provide a number of media relations services for faculty, staff and administrators:

- Writing news releases about research findings, patient care advances, new educational programs and other advances. We can appropriately handle news tied to a journal publication date. You will always have the opportunity to review what we write and make certain it is correct before it is distributed (embargoed, if needed) to news media and other sources. Sometimes, newspapers print UI news releases “as is,” for example, in the case of grant announcements or invitations to participate in special events. In other instances, print, TV, radio and online reporters use the releases as backgrounders for completing their own stories in local, regional or national media. You can see current and archived news releases at [www.uiowa.edu/~ournews/index.html](http://www.uiowa.edu/~ournews/index.html).
- "Pitching" story ideas about research, programs, patient care advances and other news to local, state and national reporters
- Helping reporters make contact with medical and other health sciences faculty who have expertise that may be helpful for a particular news or feature story
- Arranging and conducting news conferences
- Editing and distributing faculty and staff opinion pieces
- Providing media training for faculty, staff and administrators in preparation for interviews and news conferences
- Consulting with faculty, staff and administrators about how to respond to media requests by anticipating possible questions and helping outline key talking points
- Tracking stories in the print and broadcast media that are related to the UI health science colleges and to UI Health Care
- Helping the medical and other health sciences colleges develop single-issue and long-range media relations plans

### **What's Newsworthy?**

You can take the lead in providing information to the news media and public by contacting HSR or JOMC when you:

- Begin a new major study or obtain grant funds for a study
- Have study results
- Are having a paper published in a professional and/or peer-reviewed journal

- Host a scientific conference or meeting
- Receive a major award or honor
- Have an interesting or unusual research or classroom project
- Have a student or students who are doing unusual research or classroom projects

### **Basic Tips for Working with the News Media**

#### **1. What to do when a reporter calls**

*Ask questions first.* Before you agree to do an interview, ask a few questions:

- Who is the reporter and what news outlet does he or she represent?
- What is the topic of the interview?
- How long will the interview last?
- What is the reporter's deadline?
- Will the interview be taped or live?
- Will anyone else be involved in the interview?
- If the interview is for radio or television, will the audience be allowed to ask questions?

*Collect your thoughts.* Even if you are eager to do an interview with a reporter, don't do it if they call unexpectedly or if you're feeling unprepared. Ask them if you can call back in 10 or 15 minutes. Then use that time to think about what you will say.

*Prepare your key points.* Whether it's for a quick phone interview with a reporter for a national publication or a face-to-face session with a local reporter, know what the interview is about and what you want to say on the issue or topic. Pick three or four key points you'd like to focus on and write them down before the interview.

*Anticipate tough questions.* You'll be more confident in the interview if you anticipate potentially difficult questions and how you will respond. Feel free to call HSR or JOMC for help in anticipating potential questions. We also can help you rehearse your responses, if you wish. In addition, we're available to provide background on individual reporters and help you craft your key talking points.

#### **2. During the interview**

*Identify yourself.* Always identify yourself, your title, department, college and the University. Help the reporter out with the correct spelling of your name.

*Make your key points.* If the reporter's first question doesn't provide an opportunity to make your key points, you might say, "I'll be happy to get to that question in a minute, but first here are some things you should know..."

*Keep your audience in mind.* Remember that the reporter is not your audience. The people you are really speaking to are the newspaper readers, radio listeners or television viewers. When you explain your research or programs, let your audience know how it benefits them.

*Say it in plain English.* As an expert in your field, there are many terms you use casually that the average newspaper reader or television viewer may not be familiar with. Don't talk

down, but use simple language. As Winston Churchill once said, “Short words are best, and old words, when short, are best of all.”

*Keep it short and sweet.* Practice stating your key points so that each is no more than 20 to 25 seconds. You can also provide supporting details, but it’s better for you to summarize your key points than to leave it to the reporter’s discretion.

*Don’t rush.* Take a moment to think before you speak when answering questions. Even if you are doing a radio or TV interview, there’s nothing wrong with giving yourself time to formulate an answer.

*Tell the truth, even if it is unpleasant.* If you don’t know the answer, simply say, “I don’t know.” Don’t guess or speculate. When appropriate, you can say, “I don’t know, but I’ll try to find out and call you back with that information.” If you are not the appropriate person to comment on an issue, say so.

*Be patient.* Most reporters don’t have an extensive background in your area of expertise and need your help in understanding a subject. If they repeat questions, it’s perfectly acceptable to repeat your key points.

*When you finish your answer, stop talking.* Some reporters use the silence following your answer as a technique to get you to say more. If you’ve answered fully, there’s no need to fill the silence; you may say more than you wanted or something you didn’t want to say.

*There’s no such thing as “off the record.”* During an interview, anything you say is fair game. Asking a reporter to go “off the record” is no guarantee that your comments will not be used. A good rule to remember: If you don’t want to see it on the front page of the paper, don’t say it. Remember: The interview starts when the reporter walks through the door and doesn’t end until the reporter leaves. Just because the tape recorder or camera isn’t on, that doesn’t mean you can’t be quoted.

*Never say “No comment.”* Those two words suggest that you are trying to hide something. It’s better to be more specific, such as “I don’t have enough information at this time to comment on that,” or “We will need time to study that request before we can give an appropriate answer,” or “I’m sorry, but according to University policy, that information is confidential.”

*To err is human.* If you make a mistake during an interview, don’t hesitate to correct yourself, even if it’s during a television interview. It’s okay to say, “I don’t think I answered that correctly. What I meant to say was...” Likewise, if you realize your mistake after the reporter has left, don’t hesitate to call. It’s better to make a correction before the story appears.

### **3. After the interview**

*You’re not the editor.* Journalists are professionals, and it’s their job to report as accurately as possible. To ask to preview a story suggests that you doubt the reporter’s ability.

Besides, many journalists would consider it a breach of their ethics to let you preview the story. On the other hand, more and more journalists are willing to do fact-checking. It's okay to tell them where you can be reached if they have further questions or want to double-check facts or figures.

*If you're misquoted.* Reporters are human and thus prone to occasional errors. If you feel you've been misquoted, before getting on the phone, consider whether the error is major or minor. Then, if you feel the error warrants a correction, first call the reporter directly. Don't go over his or her head to an editor or publisher. If you get nowhere with the reporter, then go up the chain of command. Feel free to contact HSR or JOMC to discuss whether a correction is warranted or to ask for help in contacting a reporter.

#### **4. Special tips for television interviews**

Because television is a visual medium, you should take some time to think about your personal appearance. Here are a few helpful tips:

- Dress appropriately. Solid colors (they don't have to be dark) or simple patterns are best. When it comes to accessories, "Less is more."
- Don't start an interview until you are comfortable. For instance, if you're doing an outside interview and the sun is in your eyes, ask to be repositioned. Likewise, if the camera lights are too bright, ask for them to be adjusted.
- Keep your face open and smile when appropriate.
- Always look at the interviewer, not the camera. The exception is the live "talk-back" interview. In those circumstances, the interviewer is not in the room with you, but is asking questions from another location, which means you should directly into the camera lens
- Gesture when natural and appropriate.
- Stand or sit up straight. Don't swivel your chair or rock back and forth on your feet. If seated, lean slightly forward.
- Avoid nervous habits, such as twisting hair, adjusting glasses or playing with a pencil. Viewers won't pay attention to what you say if they're distracted by what you're doing.
- Practice makes perfect. If you're at all nervous about a TV interview, call JOMC or HSR. We can help you rehearse and give you a chance to critique your own performance.
- If a TV reporter contacts you directly and sets up an on-camera interview, please let JOMC or HSR know. We should escort the reporter to your site and can provide other assistance.

On TV, visuals are the story. You can help make your story more appealing to the reporter and potential viewers by suggesting “visuals.” Visuals can be as simple as scenes in a laboratory, with patients or students (provided the people being filmed have given their permission), or footage of you working. Sometimes even simple graphs and charts can help tell the story.

### **Your Bill of Rights**

- You have the right to know the reporter’s name and the media outlet he or she represents.
- You have the right to set ground rules for the interview, such as the place, time, duration; whether the interview will be taped or live; if other people will be participating in the interview; and whether audience members will be allowed to ask questions.
- You have the right to be quoted accurately.
- You have the right to tape record the interview, as long as you inform the reporter and anyone else whose comments will be recorded.
- You have the right to protect your privacy and that of your students, staff and patients by not speaking about what is not public. In fact, you are prohibited from disclosing confidential information such as academic, medical and personnel records.
- You have the right to maintain the security of your laboratory, office and classrooms.
- You have the right to make your main points.

### **Emergencies, Crises and Controversies**

In an emergency, the first priority is to ensure the safety of people and property. The second priority is to notify the appropriate administrators so that the situation can be assessed and appropriate actions taken. The third priority is to determine the public impact and the appropriate responses.

In the event of a disaster, emergency or some other kind of serious incident, HSR and JOMC work with University Relations and administrators to determine how University actions will be conveyed to the news media and the public.

In the event of an emergency or crisis, there is the possibility that misinformation and rumors will circulate in the absence of accurate information. For that reason, University Relations has adopted a crisis communication plan. At the heart of that plan is the appointment of a single University spokesperson who is responsible for determining the nature and scope of the situation. That spokesperson then shares that information with the news media and the public. Because timeliness of information is important during a crisis, the University will release information as quickly as possible. However, the accuracy of information will always take precedence over the speed of dissemination.

Media inquiries about policies and potential controversial matters are handled in a similar way, with questions being directed to a designated University spokesperson. Faculty and staff members who are contacted by reporters about controversial matters may refer those reporters to HSR at 335-8037 or JOMC at 356-3945. We will then put the reporter in touch with the spokesperson.

*HSR-JOPMC working with media Rev.1/29/03*