A day in the life of a Science Communicator

Alison Halliday is a freelance science communicator, specializing in research topics across the life sciences, medicine and health. After completing an undergraduate degree in Biochemistry and Genetics at Sheffield University, Alison was awarded a PhD in Human Molecular Genetics at the University of Newcastle, when she won first prize in the MRC's Max Perutz science writing competition. She carried out 5 years as a Senior Postdoctoral Research Fellow at UCL, investigating the genes involved in a childhood obesity syndrome. Moving into science communications, Alison spent 10 years at Cancer Research UK engaging the public about the charity's work before moving into freelance work. Peter Wotherspoon (Training & Careers Intern, Biochemical Society) spoke with her about her work.

How did you get into Science Communication?

I always knew that my true passion lay in science communication. During my PhD, I won first prize in the MRC's Max Perutz science writing competition, and during my postdoc I took part in the British Science Association's Media Fellowship scheme, spending a memorable summer at the BBC's science radio unit and writing science news articles for their website. These experiences were a key motivator behind my decisions to make the move to science communication.

Moving from the laboratory into my first science communications role at Cancer Research UK, I spent the next 10 years in several different roles at the charity, gaining invaluable experience – from media interviews about cancer stories, writing for the website, giving talks to the charity's supporters, conducting lab tours, interviewing scientists, or writing proposals about the charity's research to inspire donations.

Leaving the charity just over a year ago, I became freelance and I am now working with various clients on science communications projects.

Can you describe a typical day?

As a freelancer, every day is different. The bulk of my work is science writing – so one day I may be writing lay summaries of research grants for a charity and the next interviewing scientists for an article on X-ray crystallography. But I also design and deliver training on scientific topics, so another day might be spent creating activities for a new course. Currently, I'm also working one day a week in-house at The Institute of Cancer Research, London, overseeing a range of projects such as launching new e-newsletters or managing the creation of short films for social media.

What's the most interesting project you've worked on?

While at Cancer Research UK, I had the privilege of working on their largest fundraising campaign ever – to raise £100 million to help build The Francis Crick Institute in London. My initial role in the project was to write the 'Case for Support' that set out the new institute's vision and the unique opportunities for donors to play a part in its creation. Towards the end of the campaign, my role involved overseeing various communications and events to thank and recognize supporters for their generosity.

What is your advice for someone who would like to pursue a career in Science Communication?

When recruiting for roles at Cancer Research UK, I was always looking for evidence of a candidate's passion for science communication – which could be a range of activities such as starting their own blog, taking part in outreach activities or writing for their university magazine. It's so easy to get involved – so get out there and start communicating!.

What's been the greatest challenge in your career so far?

Work–life balance is an ongoing challenge. Finding myself in a senior management position while trying to bring up a young family proved tricky, triggering my decision to become freelance. But I think I've found my happy balance for now! ■

For career information from the Biochemical Society, visit **http://www.biochemistry.org/Education/Careers.aspx**

Job Profile – Science Communicator

The role of Science Communicators is to develop communications materials and events with the purpose of delivering key information regarding important scientific findings to a wide range of audiences.

Responsibilities

A Science Communicator is responsible for developing communication strategies, interacting with members of the scientific community and their target audiences, organizing events and engaging in outreach activities. A large part of science communication also includes science writing for websites, journals and newsletters.

Qualifications and key skills

A Science Communicator is often expected to have a science or engineering background, usually to at least an undergraduate level, with good capacity for understanding novel scientific developments and research. Key competencies include strong written and verbal communication skills, excellent organizational and interpersonal skills, and an interest in both science and communication.

Salary and career development

Salaries for Science Communicators generally range between £18,000 and £25,000 at entry level. Career progression generally involves taking a managerial role in the communications and public outreach departments, taking on editorial roles or moving to larger organizations.