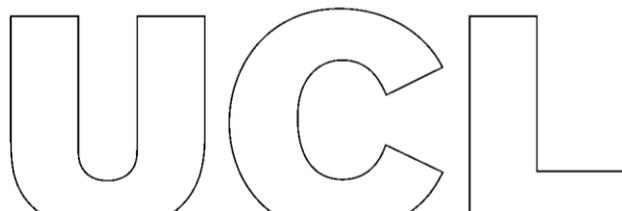


PHARMACOLOGY DEPARTMENT

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**BBC Complaints,
PO Box 1922,
Glasgow G2 3WT**

12 May, 2006

Formal complaint concerning the BBC 2 series on Alternative Medicine: the evidence

I am submitting this complaint with the greatest reluctance, because I am generally a great admirer of the BBC in general, and of their scientific programmes in particular. The series itself has had a drubbing both from scientists and from TV critics, so why submit a complaint now? The reason is largely that I am doing so is because of the almost complete unwillingness of the producers to discuss the scientific questions raised by the series in the correspondence that followed the series, or in the press. It is that unwillingness to listen, quite as much as the original programme, that is the reason for my letter. My motive is entirely to help the BBC make a better programme next time.

The grounds for my complaint have already been laid out in great detail in the complaint by Simon Singh. I shall not repeat all the material that he sent to you, but I agree with every word that he said/

Following my first contact with the BBC, I was encouraged by the fact that Anne Laking, the series producer, came to see me, and we talked for over an hour. The outcome was disappointing, because she would not listen to, or discuss, any of the scientific questions. The sole purpose of the visit seemed to be to defend the series. Subsequent correspondence with Keith Scholey and John Lynch has followed exactly the same pattern.

I have put it to all of these people that the problem with the series lay primarily in the choice of advisors. The one exception to that is, of course, Edzard Ernst, but as you know he has said that his written advice, sent two months before the series was broadcast, was ignored. Apart from him, there was not a single sceptical voice raised throughout the series, apart from some mild scepticism by Kathy Sykes herself. This complaint is not primarily about Kathy Sykes herself. I have been a great admirer of her work in areas about which she knows more about. It was, of course, a mistake to choose a young physicist to make a programme about a medical topic, but how the blame for lack of scepticism should be divided between her and the producers I cannot say. My guess it came largely from the producers.

You may be interested to know that the outrage caused in the scientific community by these programmes played a large part in the formation of a group of senior scientists who have come together to try to provide some [public education about the mumbo jumbo of most alternative medicine.

The only thing that I have to add to Simon Singh's submission are copies of some of the correspondence that I have had with Keith Scholey. I also append a letter that I sent to John Lynch after his defence of the series in the Guardian (defence that was ill-informed about the science and totally unapologetic). That letter to Lynch brought forth no response at all, not even an acknowledgment. That seemed to me odd, because I think that these matters are ones on which I am well qualified to comment, and it is strange that the makers of factual programmes should seem to wish to alienate the very people on whom they are dependent for the facts.

I have spent a great deal longer on this matter than I should have done, and I have spent that time because I am concerned about the public being misled about complementary medicine. I have been so disappointed by the response I've had from the BBC so far, that I have been driven to submit a formal complaint. Even a modest acknowledgement on the part of the producers that they had made some mistakes, and would seek better advice next time, could have avoided this. But no such acknowledgment has been forthcoming.

David Colquhoun

Email sent to Anne Laking on 5th April 2006 after our meeting on 4th April

Dear Anne

Thanks for coming round. I enjoyed the discussion, although there were several things that we didn't get round to talking about, like the shockingly misleading presentation of the heart surgery. Did you actually know what the patient had been treated with. If so, why was it presented as it was? If not, why not?

You were kind enough to listen to my criticisms, but in truth I don't really think you answered any of them satisfactorily. As you say, I prefer to deal with it informally, but whether "we have now done so" is a judgement that I can't make yet. I continue to be alarmed that the BBC's attitude in public has been to refute all criticism. I guess I won't really know the answer to that until the next series comes along.

The main conclusion of our discussion was, I suppose, that you'd picked the wrong presenter and the wrong advisors. They are crucial decisions, and it must be hard to get them right since they are decisions that have to be made by people with little or no experience in the area. Nevertheless, it doesn't seem too hard to imagine that, when making a programme about drug treatments (conventional or CAM) it might be a good idea to ask the opinion of a pharmacologist.

Best regards

David

At 16:55 05/04/2006, you wrote:

Dear Professor Colquhoun,

Thank you for your time yesterday and for a constructive meeting. It was helpful to hear your points about the series and to discuss them with you, and, as with all feedback, it helps to inform our future thinking. I hope, also, we were able to clarify some points.

I appreciate your desire to address these matters informally and hope we have now done so.

Yours

Anne Laking

Anne Laking
Executive Producer,
BBC Science
Specialist Factual

Email to Keith Scholey, 6th April 2006-05-12

Dear Mr Scholey

Oh dear, oh dear. It seems that it is not over yet. As you know, I have contacted 8 of the 10 signatories of last Saturday's letter. This morning I heard from the last of the them, Andrew Vickers. This is what he told me

"I was shown the text of the letter but didn't fully agree with it and told them so. I said something along the lines that the series didn't do full justice to the subject matter (how could it possibly?) but that what they did was fair and reasonable within the constraints set by the medium. You are also right to point out that my comments only go so far as the acupuncture episodes (which I saw) rather than the other two shows (which I did not). No doubt had I been shown a final version for signature I would have also pointed this out. "

So it seems that a second signatory to that letter was essentially falsified. It gives me no pleasure at all to bash the BBC. I'm your number one fan normally. But this has gone much too far.

I have put this on my web site, and I'm working on an article about it, so if you have anything to say in your own defence, this is the time to say it.

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Pharmacology/dc-bits/quack.html#bbc3>

David Colquhoun

And a PS on 7th April

I notice that all seems to have gone quiet at your end since some facts came out about the letter in last Saturday's Guardian came out. Is there any good reason why this story should not appear in the press? A simple (public) "sorry" from the BBC might suffice. Silence just makes me more determined.

Best regards

David

Email sent to john.lynch@bbc.co.uk on 19th April 2006 (no reply or acknowledgement received)

Hello

I dont think we have corresponded before, but you may have seen my crits of the Alternative Medicine series (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Pharmacology/dc-bits/quack.html#bbc2>). I have also spoken at some length, though with little outcome, with Ann Laking who came to see me after Id written the crits.

I have just seen your defence in the Guardian today, and I must say Im disappointed. As I pointed out to Ann Laking, it is a great pity that you didnt think of getting a pharmacologist as an advisor. As far as I can tell the only appropriate advisor that you chose was Edzard Ernst, and it is a matter of public record that he feels his advice was not followed.

Ive been through this several times now with various people, but I care enough about pharmacology, and about communicating science to the public, that Ill go through your response.

It suggested that the programme makers were "under instructions from higher up" to make "a happy story about complementary medicine"; that the production could not distinguish evidence from anecdote

Well I didnt suggest anything about higher up myself. Id assumed that it was just what the producers thought would be popular, combined with poor knowledge of the area (Ernst excepted). I think that is what Simon Singh meant too.

These allegations are completely untrue and a slur on both the producers and the BBC Science Unit. The only pressure, exerted by me, was to present good journalism supported by valid evidence.

The core of my objections to the series lay in the amazing paucity of evidence (especially in view of its subtitle). You seemed continually to look at projects that might, at some time in the future, be interesting, but for which the evidence was not yet in. That was true of Sutherlandia, it was true of the Imperial College work and several others. I know you didnt claim that *Sutherlandia* works (and since it isnt known, why feature it so prominently?). But the impression given to the public as certainly that it as good stuff (sufficiently so that your programme is being used to boost the sales). This seems to me to be the most irresponsible part of the lot. It is not unlikely that the publicity that you gave to *Sutherlandia* will result in the death of people with AIDS who decide to use it in place of real anti-retrovirals. And why was it not mentioned that *Sutherlandia* may actually interfere with retrovirals? Since that is almost all that has been published about *Sutherlandia*, it really isnt very hard to find. And why werent Albrechts connections with Phyto Nova declared? You really should be more careful when dealing with matters of life and death.

In the final episode there was not even a smidgeon of evidence about anything until 3/4 of the way through the programme (9.43 pm: I kept an accurate timeline see <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Pharmacology/dc-bits/quack.html#bbc23>). And when it did come it was selective and misleading. This does not seem compatible with your claim about supported by valid evidence at all.

A sequence which featured acupuncture being used instead of general anaesthetic during open heart surgery in China was alleged to be misleading by "underplaying" the use of drugs which were also administered. Not so. The programme script was careful to say the patient was "sedated by drugs and her chest numbed".

It was exceedingly misleading. I replayed that section several times when writing my web stuff and the remark about "sedated by drugs and her chest numbed" could not have been more parenthetical if it tried. If youd had better advisors you would have realised that this particular con is a really old one, presumably part of the Chinese governments anti-Western propaganda. Sometime in the 1960s the Medical Research Council sent a delegation to China to investigate the amazing claims, and they concluded that it was a con. (That was too long ago to be on the web, another reason why you needed better-informed advisors,) It is, in any case, absurd to dismiss a mixture of midazolam, droperidol, fentanyl as sedatives. They are anaesthetics when used in that way. Once again you needed a pharmacologist. I fear that the fact that you continue to defend this just means that there was nobody around to tell you what midazolam, droperidol, and fentanyl actually are.

Most worrying was the allegation that the BBC had paid for a scientific experiment to investigate acupuncture as a "TV stunt" and had "sensationalised" the results.

I was quite aware that Green didnt think you treated his results unfairly because I had written to him as one of the eight signatories of the infamous letter of 25th April that the BBC concocted. Furthermore he was the only one of those eight who had actually seen all of the programmes. The objection to this part of the programmes was not that you misrepresented the results, but that the results said next to nothing that could

interest the public. In particular they say nothing whatsoever about whether acupuncture is any good for pain (they didnt measure pain) or whether it is advisable to try it in a particular condition. What they show is that real needles and dummy needles produce different signals in the brain. And there is nothing in the least surprising about that! The programme was claimed to investigate the evidence that CAM works, which I take to mean the evidence that it helps patients (more than a placebo). Greens work may well interest FMRI people, but told us nothing about the matter under investigation.

There has been a huge positive response to the series from the scientific and medical community. Well its hard to counter that one without knowing who you are talking about (Id be interested to hear who they are). That certainly isnt true of any part of the scientific and medical community that Ive come across. The reaction of my pharmacological colleagues was a collective groan, and they mostly switched off after a while, seeing at as just another TV apology for CAM. The effect that the programmes have had here is just the opposite to bring together a group of people who have a real interest in the evidence, with a view to seeing how it might be propagated it more accurately.

I have the highest respect for the BBC Science Unit at its best. It gives me no pleasure to criticise. That is why Im writing to you not to the newspapers. It is at its best when you have people who know what they are talking about. Thats why David Attenborough and Steve Jones are so superb. That brings us back to what went wrong this time a presenter who knows nothing about biology or medicine (good though she is in her own field) combined with bad choice of advisors, and, judging by what Ernst says, not listening sufficiently to your best adviser. You are really trying to defend the indefensible in this instance. However often you say black is white, it isnt going to alter the view of most of the scientific community; it just annoys us. Why not just admit that it wasnt very good, and have another go at it? There is always an audience for this sort of stuff, and its crying out for a bit of good investigative journalism. It would be far more interesting to think about how the job could be done well, than to keep arguing about your last effort.

Now back to my real job.

Best regards
David Colquhoun

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Subsequent email correspondence with Keith Scholey

Keith

Oh dear, this is really dragging on a bit. I've already made fairly detailed criticisms of the programmes on my web site and to Anne Laking, as well as my last letter, but nobody seems to be listening or taking them seriously. They are, believe it or not, intended to be helpful comments, made with the aim of trying to ensure that next time you venture into the alternative medicine field, the programme is more factual (the title of your department). But I will do it all over again if you are really going to take them seriously.

On the letter question, all I can say is what the 8 people said in their letters to me. I have put some quotations on the web. All but Jack Tinker seemed unhappy. What seems to have happened is that most of them restricted their comments to the way that their own contribution was treated, and most were quite happy with that. But seven of them told me that they did not endorse the final sentence of the letter (the blanket endorsement of the series) and the fact that only one of the 8 had actually seen the programmes speaks for itself. Tinker himself had not seen most of them. Unfortunately I have not seen exactly what form of the letter was sent to each of the people. Neither have I seen the scripts that they are said to have "signed off". But it is what went out that matters. At least one person said that the version of the letter they saw was not the same as the published version, and another said that it was not stated that the letter was for publication. What is true is that they all seem to want the matter to go away and to have nothing more to do with it (I know how they feel). It does seem that the letter was a bit of a PR stunt that was not well-handled. Not a very sensible one either, since it is so easy to check up on it.

I still think that the easy way out of this for you is not to maintain this blanket denial that anything went wrong. Many, indeed most, of your programmes are superb, but we all make mistakes. At our meeting yesterday, some pretty senior people in the medical and pharmacological worlds certainly thought you had. The meeting was not primarily about the BBC of course, but about the general question of how to prevent taxpayers' money being spent on untested treatments in the NHS and on mickey-mouse degrees in universities. To be more constructive, why don't you consider programme(s) on that topic? There are lots of people who'd be eager to help, me included. That would be a much more pleasant and helpful way to spend time than dwelling on past mistakes. And I think it could be made quite watchable.

Best regards

David Colquhoun

At 16:48 13/04/2006, you wrote:

Dear Professor Colquhoun,<?xml:namespace prefix = o ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />

Thank you for your email of 10 April.

You say that most of the signatories to the Guardian letter seem to feel they were misrepresented. This does not seem to tally with what signatories have said to members of the programme team about how their work was represented but I will raise this with Anne Laking when she returns to the office from leave. I will be on leave myself next week but I would expect to be able to reply to your allegation soon after I return to the office on 24 April.

As far as the separate issue of the series itself is concerned I can only repeat what I said in my previous email. The best option now for all parties would be for you to set out your complaints about the programmes in as much detail as you think fit and submit them to me. We can then investigate and respond formally. Should you remain unhappy after our reply you have the right to escalate the complaint to the <?xml:namespace prefix = st1 ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:smarttags" />BBCs independent Editorial Complaints Unit.

Kind regards

Keith Scholey

From: David Colquhoun [<mailto:d.colquhoun@ucl.ac.uk>]

Sent: 10 April 2006 15:28

To: Keith Scholey

Subject: Re: Alternative Medicine

Dear Keith

Ah good. I'm glad you wrote. I was beginning to wonder if the beeb had closed ranks.

It's quite simple really. There are two problems

- (1) The programmes, as before
- (2) and now the letter in the Guardian.

The programmes

The problems with the programmes were just errors of judgement, based, I'd guess, on the fact that nobody involved in making it had the knowledge to pick the right advisors (apart from Ernst, of course, and he claims that advice sent on writing, two months before transmission, was ignored). Kathy Sykes is an excellent presenter when talking about things she knows about, but that doesn't include alt med (or anything biological). The wonderful thing about David Attenborough and Steve Jones is that they make programmes only about things they know about, and consequently would be able to choose the right advisors too. They have managed to avoid the temptation to become universal celebrities. Kathy, sadly, didn't resist it,

This is not an entirely a trivial matter, For example, the misleading treatment of Sutherlandia, now being exploited by advertisers, could well lead to deaths. I know that you didn't say that it works, but you must be aware as I am that people hear what they want to hear, and spending so much time on something so completely untested, and possibly harmful, was, I still believe, irresponsible. The impression you left should be corrected publicly.

The question of how the open heart surgery "under acupuncture" was done was also, according to Simon Singh, completely misrepresented. I asked Anne Laking about this, but I could still not discover whether (a) the production team knew what the patient had but decided to barely mention it, or (b) they were unaware. It was good of Anne to spend time listening to the problems. She was quite charming. but I got no straight answers to the questions that I asked and no real admission that anything much had gone wrong.

The letter

I hope you have seen what I wrote about the letter on the web (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Pharmacology/dc-bits/quack.html#bbc3>). Please tell me if there are any errors of fact in it. If so, I'm happy to correct them.

Since Anne Laking agreed that the letter had been written by the Beeb (and I have a copy of an email from Kim Creed) I guess there is no argument about that. I also have emails from 8 of the 10 signatories, most of whom seem to feel they were misrepresented. In a way I am now more upset by the letter than by the programmes. The faults in the programmes, though I believe them to be real, were presumably the result of naivety. The letter, on the other hand, seems to have been on the brink of being dishonest PR. It came as a bit of a shock to find only one signatory who had actually seen the programmes. I have the emails from the signatories to whom I wrote and I can back up what I say on the web site. I think that you owe the readers of the Guardian and explanation in writing (to the paper, not to me) about how a letter could be published with which so many of the signatories disagree

I see two ways forward. The easy way would be for you to make some public acknowledgement of the criticisms made of the programmes, and even more, of the letter. As far as I'm concerned, that could be the end of it (though obviously I can't speak for others who are planning formal complaints). Or you can keep on suffering the public criticism in the form of articles and complaints.

I really think you'd come out of it better if you took the former course. It gives me no pleasure at all to snipe at the BBC. I'm on record as saying that I'd be happy if you doubled the licence fee -its worth that for Planet Earth and the Today programme alone. The BBC suffered horribly and unjustly from spin by politicians after the execrable Hutton report. That's why it pains me to see them behaving like Alastair Campbell (in the matter of the letter). Still less do I take pleasure at sniping at Kathy Sykes.

I guess there are at least two things we can thank you for. An enormous increase in traffic on my web site, and the effect that these arguments have had in bringing together a bunch of fairly heavyweight scientists to organise a concerted opposition to the continued propaganda for quackery. That group is having its first meeting on Wednesday to plan what to do next. I hope that I'll be able to give them some good news

Above all. if you do a follow up series, for heavens sake ask a pharmacologist. I'd be happy to suggest some names.

Best regards
David Colquhoun