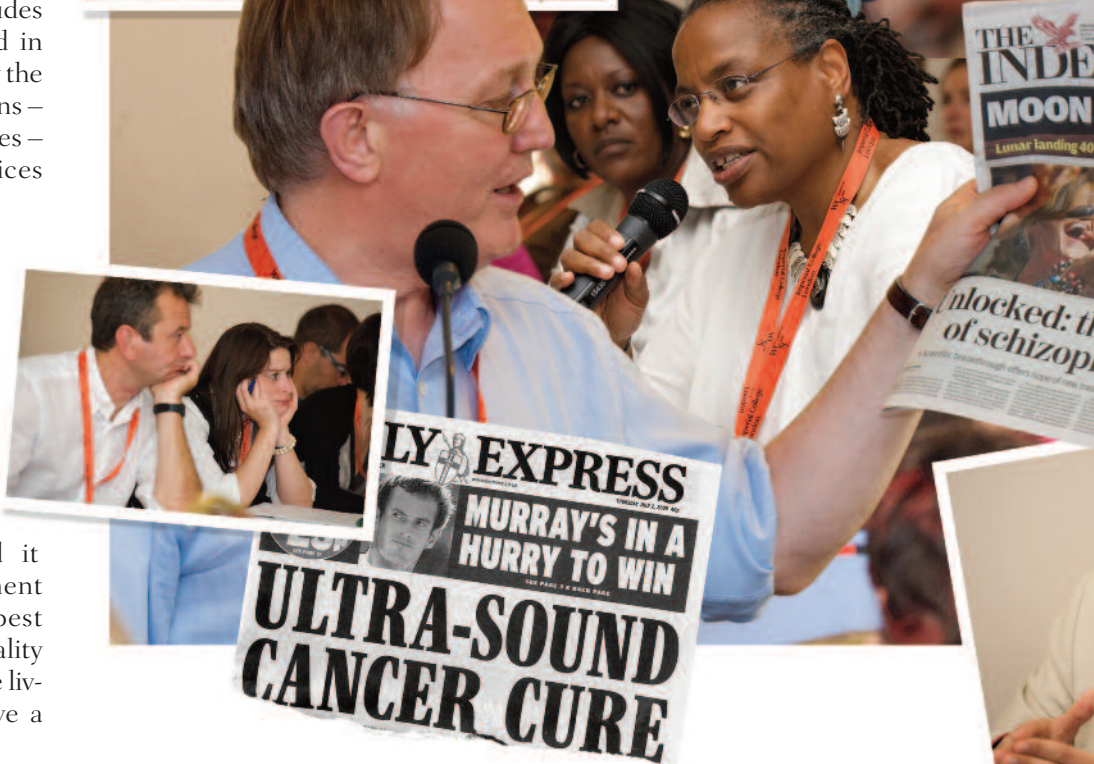


Should we expect better from

From California's wired-up silicon valley to the remote rural hinterlands of central Africa, from the Graeco-Roman cultures of southern Europe to Scandinavia with its Viking heritage, everyone harbours attitudes to cancer that are deeply rooted in their culture, are shaped in part by the experiences of previous generations – parents, grandparents, great uncles – and in turn shape the life choices they make.

A great weight of unnecessary suffering and death could be avoided, if only it were possible to influence those attitudes – and consequently behaviours – by helping all these people understand the growing evidence-based consensus on how they can minimise their chances of getting cancer, catch it early should it develop, and find the treatment options that give them the best chance of surviving with their quality of life intact, or at least to continue living a full life and finally achieve a dignified and pain-free death.

Journalists are well-placed to influence public attitudes through what they broadcast and publish in print and online, yet the mass media constantly distorts key messages by sensationalist reporting about deadly hidden hazards, wonder foods and



breakthrough cancer cures. Is it journalists – irresponsible, unprofessional and out to make a quick impact – who are to blame? Are health professionals misguided in expecting the mass media to take on the role of a

public health agency, even if it could? Is it possible to improve the quality of coverage of cancer in the mass media?

These were some of the questions ESO put to an international gathering of journalists convened in London

the media?

A conversation with health journalists



JASON HARRIS

last July at the 2009 World Conference of Science Journalists. More than one hundred journalists from all over the world took part in two sessions, one on reporting cancer break-

throughs, the other on informing attitudes and beliefs about cancer. The sessions opened up a welcome dialogue about how health and science journalists see their role, and what

can be done by everyone with an interest in promoting cancer control to improve the service the media provides its readers, viewers and listeners on cancer-related stories.