



The Federation of European Nutrition Societies (FENS) issues guidance for writing and reviewing press releases

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Received: 22 December 2022 / Accepted: 14 February 2023
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The Federation of European Nutrition Societies (FENS) is an umbrella organisation which currently has membership from 26 national nutrition societies from across Europe [1]. FENS aims to promote the advancement of nutrition science through international cooperation, to encourage communication and collaboration amongst nutrition scientists as well as to disseminate information, to coordinate the European nutrition societies and to organise a European Nutrition Conference every 4 years. Having identified issues with the credibility and capability of human nutrition research [2, 3], the FENS President is currently sponsoring an activity aimed at improving standards and assuring trust in the science of nutrition [4]. This activity involves three working groups looking into concepts and methodologies; organisation, capabilities and funding; and external communication and public trust.

Working Group 3, which is composed of 20 nutrition scientists from across Europe, has been charged with developing guidance to assure and promote stakeholder trust in nutrition science. The apparent lack of a standardised approach to disseminating nutrition research findings to key

stakeholders such as clinicians and the general public has potentially contributed to a feeling of confusion and mistrust, thereby undermining the credibility of the science of nutrition. The Working Group identified a need to develop guidance for the communication of the findings of research in nutrition science to the public with a focus on accuracy of what is reported and on the language used.

The starting point for communication of nutrition science research findings to the public is often a press release issued by an institution involved in conducting the research. Sumner et al. [5] identified the press release as being a key source of inaccuracy in the communication of nutrition science information, both in terms of exaggerated causal claims and exaggerated inference from *in vitro* and animal studies to the human setting. Any exaggeration or inaccuracy in the press release is then likely reflected in the downstream media news stories and articles. This exposes the public to inaccurate, exaggerated and, sometimes, wrong information. The cumulative effect of this, especially when different news stories on the same or similar topics appear to present divergent information, is that the public do not know what

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to believe, they are confused and develop distrust of nutrition science, they lose interest in the subject, and they seek out and listen to advice from poorly informed sources. The Working Group concluded that improving the accuracy of the press release represented a key opportunity for reducing misleading nutrition science related news.

A priority for the Working Group was understanding the current practice in writing and reviewing a press release prior to publication and dissemination to the public and mainstream media outlets. An online survey of over 80 European nutrition scientists conducted by the Working Group in 2021 identified that many respondents either did not have access to or were unaware of any existing guidance within their academic institution for writing or reviewing press releases. Surprisingly, 92% of respondents had concerns about the content of the press release which were not addressed prior to the press release being made available to the media and subsequently to the public. The Working Group identified an absence of national or European guidance for writing and/or reviewing press releases for nutrition science research, although some institutions have guidance for internal use only.

The process of preparing a press release is dynamic and the drafts will circulate between the press office and the research team prior to release. The way the press office acts to communicate the release to the media is outside the scope of the Working Group, which can only focus on nutrition scientists, but it was felt that there was a clear requirement for additional resources for nutrition scientists to help them with writing and reviewing press releases and managing the interaction with their press office.

A guidance document was developed to support nutrition scientists in improving the quality and clarity of press releases related to their work by detailing step-by-step guidance for writing and reviewing press releases. The guidance document may be found at <https://fensnutrition.org/activities/fens-guidelines-on-writing-and-reviewing-press-releases/> and as online supplementary material. Checklists for writing and reviewing a press release and a template for scoring a press release can be found at <https://fensnutrition.org/activities/fens-guidelines-on-writing-and-reviewing-press-releases/>.

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The aims of the guidance document are fourfold:

- To have standardised and accessible guidance for writing nutrition science press releases.
- To provide nutrition scientists with a comprehensive overview of key information to be included in a press release when writing one themselves.
- To ensure nutrition scientists recognise their responsibility in ensuring their nutrition research is clearly and accurately represented in any press release.
- To help nutrition scientists thoroughly appraise press releases.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00394-023-03122-y>.

Funding There was no funding associated with this research.

Data availability Data in this article can be made available upon request to the corresponding author.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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