

Acceptance Speech by Debora MacKenzie – on being awarded the 2024 Lifetime Achievement Award, 3 July 2024

HELLO. Thank you for that welcome. I have to say, this award really was a total surprise and I am, as I think some of you people say, “chuffed to bits” to be getting it. Thank you so much, it really is an honour.



1 *Debora MacKenzie and ABSW Chair Andy Extance*

I have ten minutes to respond to this honour, and as there are young journalists in the room, I would like to tell two old hack stories that illustrate encouraging facts I have learned since I started in this business in 1982. Encouraging fact one: as many of you know, it’s actually really easy to get scoops when you cover science, because we talk to the scientists when few others do. Encouraging fact two: a lot of the time no one except possibly your editor will give a damn about these scoops, and they won’t change the world the way they should. Except sometimes.

So example one. My first big news story for New Scientist, in 1983, was the courtroom trial near Milan of Hoffmann-LaRoche, the big Swiss chemical company that now owned a factory in Seveso, Italy, that had blown up some years earlier and dumped dioxin on 37,000 of the neighbours. I was a bit worried about doing this story, as my visa to live in Europe depended on my part-time job for another big Swiss chemical company, and they could be pretty litigious with employees who dished any dirt on any of them. One had recently been jailed.

But Fred Pearce, the new news editor at New Scientist, assured me I could use a pseudonym if I had to, and the magazine would send flowers if the worst happened. Yes, he said that. So there I was, in a courtroom in Monza, crammed with a hundred other journalists, and, as happened so often back then, almost the only woman in the room.

The other one came up to me and said, hello, I’m Kate Adie from the BBC. This was before she was a famous war reporter. You’re from New Scientist? Good, can you explain this chemical stuff to me? Every science hack in room just recognised that.

Meanwhile, the Italian TV cameraman was looking for the shot that would convey to the world’s TV stations that the world’s press was gathered for the trial. So of course he focused on the red-headed woman and the blond woman talking earnestly in the middle of the crowd. I watched the news that night certain my boss back in Basel was seeing this and wondering if I should maybe fly straight back to Canada from Milan.

Unbelievably Swiss TV didn’t carry it, and – the point of this story - I then ended up getting the scoop no one else in that room got, even Kate. Roche was defending itself by claiming the explosion resulted from mysterious chemical processes no one could have predicted. I decided to interview a defendant who had not shown up, the guy who designed the plant. The court papers said he lived in Lausanne, Switzerland. I went to a fancy phone company office in Milan that had every phone book in Europe, and found his number. For those of you who have never seen a phone book, there’s a scene in “All the President’s Men” where the heroes do this.

The plant designer said, I'll talk to you this evening. I got on a train to Lausanne. It was the wrong one and I arrived two hours late. But he still talked to me, and it turned out the chemical plant would not have dumped dioxin on the neighbours if the company that owned it had not insisted on adding pressure release discs that, if the pressure in the equipment rose dangerously from a reaction that wasn't stopped, which is what happened at Seveso, blew open and dumped the vat of exploding chemicals outside the plant. On the neighbours. This kinda demolished the company's defence, as installing the disks meant it knew this could happen, and it obviously hadn't really thought it through. We ran almost a full page.

No one took a blind bit of notice. The defendants were all convicted anyway, as expected, but most were let off on appeal years later.

This happens to all of us: finding and reporting what scientists say is the truth often as not, when vested interests are involved, makes no difference to anything. This can get discouraging. But sometimes by sheer chance you get lucky.

Example two: In January 2004, most of southeast Asia had millions of chickens and a few people dying of H5N1 bird flu – you may have seen that name in the press lately. The virus emerged in China in 1997, and since then Chinese farmers had vaccinated their chickens, so there were no more big visible outbreaks in China, which insisted it no longer had the virus. Yet scientists in Hong Kong had twice, including just two years previously, published strong evidence that in fact it was still circulating widely in China, in the vaccinated chickens.

So I phoned the flu guy at the WHO. It was January in Switzerland, and I got his mobile as he sat on a bus heading up the ski slopes. He remarked that this virus had been around for at least a year, as they had a sample from a year ago that was virtually identical. Where was it from, I asked. Oh, I can't tell you that, he said.

So I asked a few virologists and as I expected, they said, oh probably China don't quote me. So that week I wrote that this huge viral outbreak started a year ago, probably in China. The next day China's deputy minister of agriculture called a press conference to denounce the article as "purely a guess" - which it kind of was, but I did say probably. The foreign ministry said we "did not respect science", which certainly wasn't true. I got an apparently orchestrated campaign of abusive emails from Chinese students abroad, one accusing me of complicity in the Opium War.

But the day after the press conference, I got an early morning phone call, from the head of infectious diseases at WHO who was not on the slopes, he was in China. "Your article did it," he told me. He had stormed into the minister's office with it, and said China was going to have to come clean, because "these people have worked it out, so others will". Sure enough, two days later, The Times, which *had* a China correspondent, followed up on our piece, and confirmed that the virus was killing birds and people across south China, and the Chinese press had been gagged.

Meanwhile an amazing and almost hilarious thing happened: an official Chinese press release announced H5N1 was indeed in two Chinese provinces just north of Vietnam. Two days later it announced three more provinces farther north. The next day, four more provinces, including Xinjiang, which if you're interested is 77 times the size of Wales. Two more days and it had crossed China. The aim was to make it look like a wave of virus was spreading across China from Vietnam, but even if they *could* fly, chickens couldn't possibly carry it that fast. It was really a face-saving wave of press releases.

After that I think some hapless newbie at the ag ministry was assigned to read New Scientist every week to watch what we were saying. Chinese state media started making nice, reporting our further coverage of H5N1 very approvingly. I think studying H5N1 even got a bit easier for Chinese scientists. But even better, it seems no one told the reader to stop.

In 2007, I reported a devastating new variety of black stem rust fungus called Ug99 to which the world's wheat crop had no resistance. Fungus usually doesn't get headlines and I saw virtually no other reports on this. But China relies heavily on wheat. I got a call a while later offering me a trip to the big wheat research lab in Mexico, because they said our piece was why the Chinese ag ministry then decided to massively support its effort to breed resistant crops, which had been severely underfunded. Those wheat varieties are now out there.

So once in a blue moon telling the science story works. You get to change the world a tiny bit for the better. We still aren't prepared for an H5N1 pandemic, but China admitting the sheer scale of its poultry disease in 2004 helped jump-start the research that we *have* done on vaccines and virology. I've only got a few bits and pieces like that after 40 years of doing this job, but that's enough to make me feel I didn't waste my life, and that's as much as you can ask for. That, and of course an ABSW lifetime achievement award. Again, thank you ever so much.