

Psychiatrist and journalist win prize for defending science

In recognition of their efforts to champion science despite extreme opposition, a science journalist and psychiatrist have both received the 2012 John Maddox prize. Becky McCall reports.

Last week, the inaugural John Maddox Prize for Standing up for Science 2012 was granted to UK psychiatrist Simon Wessely for his work on chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) and Fang Shi-min, a freelance journalist from Beijing, China, for revealing clinics using unproven medicine.

The prize is a joint initiative from the journal, *Nature*, and the charity, Sense About Science, with some support from the Kohn Foundation. The four judges were Philip Campbell, Editor, *Nature*; Tracey Brown, Director, Sense About Science; Brenda Maddox, wife of the late John Maddox who was an editor at *Nature* for 22 years and a founding trustee at Sense About Science; and Colin Blakemore, Director of the Centre for the Study of the Senses at the University of London's School of Advanced Study.

Commenting on why the prize was significant for science, Blakemore said: "I think it's crucial people are well informed about science beyond the scientific facts, that they understand the way in which science actually works."

He added that by recognising both scientists and science journalists, the prize acknowledged that both groups epitomise the importance of standing up for science against manipulation of evidence for political, personal, or commercial gain.

Shi-min was awarded the prize for his bravery and determination in standing up to death threats for his work uncovering clinics in China that promote unproven treatments. The judges also felt his work highlighted the importance of informing a wide public readership about evidence-based medical therapies.

Wessely, professor of psychological medicine at Kings College London (KCL), UK, is an authority on CFS and as

a psychiatrist and academic researcher, has treated hundreds of patients with the illness. With his colleagues at KCL, he developed a rehabilitation strategy and later set up one of the first National Health Service programmes for CFS patients who have previously been the subject of ridicule and considered by some to have "yuppie flu", one of the many myths of the illness that his research helped dispel.

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In stark contrast to the beliefs of most patients with CFS and the scientific community, a small but vocal group of objectors believe that psychiatric therapies mock their illness as unreal or imaginary. "Some people just think that the word psychiatry is itself anathema", remarks Wessely. "Most people, including most of my patients, have a broad view of their illness and accept that we don't have all the answers, but a small group find that unacceptable."

As a neuroscientist, Blakemore emphasises that CFS is undoubtedly a disorder of the brain. "But some people make a fierce distinction between neurology and psychiatry, which is deeply offensive to people with mental health problems in general. CFS is probably a constellation of clinical conditions, like schizophrenia or dementia."

Wessely has received both e-mail and telephone threats for his work on CFS, although he says the most sinister is the ceaseless internet slander and deliberate distortion of his work

and writings. On police advice he has similar security arrangements to those who do animal research and receives regular security briefings. Wessely's experiences resonate with Blakemore, who has been attacked and threatened for his scientific views in the past. But Blakemore points out that, remarkably, in Wessely's case, the extremists often have CFS themselves and have an almost self-destructive approach, attacking the researchers who are doing their best to understand the condition and help them. "For patients to dismiss this work because it is being done by psychiatrists, and to attack those who are trying to help, is perverse and reveals a long outdated suspicion about the reality of mental illness", adds Blakemore.

When asked why he had never given up in spite of the persistent attacks he faced, Wessely explained that he always strongly felt the support of his peers and his own patients. Acknowledging his colleagues in the field, Wessely says he is one of many people working on CFS who have had similar experiences. "Maybe I received the prize because I'm probably more visible and I've been around longer. But some of the most persecuted are not psychiatrists but doctors and scientists working in many different disciplines such as infectious diseases, which is why this is considered anti-science. If you arrive at an answer which is not what the extremists want then you become a target."

The winners each received a certificate and £2000. Wessely announced at the prize ceremony that he was giving half of this money to the Keep Libel Laws out of Science campaign—a cause that would have met with John Maddox's approval.

Becky McCall



Simon Wessely



Fang Shi-min