

Expert Knowledge: what we can and can't expect from 'experts' in the media

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We frequently see experts or scientists quoted in the press, but it isn't always clear what their role is. Here is a general guide of what we can expect from experts – and what they cannot do. Most medics, scientists, academics, or researchers are bound by particular ethical and professional guidelines, so the 'can't do' section of this list isn't something that should be seen as optional.

Journalists should not ask experts to provide things within the 'can't do' list, and nor should they report them as though such information has been given. The public ought to be sceptical of experts who regularly seem to deliver what is in the 'can't do' list – and if in doubt can question the person's institution or professional body about whether the expert's behaviour is professionally acceptable (there is a list of professional organisations at the end).

Experts Can...

- Provide information about their research, area of teaching, or clinical practice.
- Discuss issues within their area of expertise (for example their branch of science, or form of therapy).
- Reflect on other research projects or ideas expressed by others in their field.
- Offer general guidance linked to their area (e.g. what questions to ask your doctor about your health).
- Provide journalists and the public with information (e.g. results of their research, or a link to a useful book or website).
- Use evidence or experience to suggest areas where academia, science, or health care can be improved.

Experts Can't...

- Talk about the results or outcomes of any research they have conducted until it has been published, or is presented at a conference.
- Discuss the results of other people's work before they have presented or published it.
- Make absolute diagnosis on health without referring a person to a GP or other healthcare service.
- Talk directly about celebrities, clients, or case studies provided by a journalist – the reason for this is that if they *know* the person in question it's unethical to reveal personal details, and if they *don't know* the person they lack sufficient information to make a diagnosis about their physical or emotional health. It is acceptable to talk about an issue linked to a celebrity (if Diva X is known to be jealous an expert can talk about jealousy in general, but not about Diva X).
- Provide journalists or others with contact details of clients, or participants in their research.
- Make claims that go beyond their data.
- Talk outside their area of research, practice, and expertise.

What's an 'expert'?

As mentioned, many people are confused about the professional abilities of those presented as 'experts'. So how can you be sure that an expert is adhering to their professional guidelines, or is

qualified to speak within their area? Don't feel that because they seem to be quoted all the time, or because they have an impressive qualification in front of their name, this makes them the 'best'.

Chances are they are the person most eager to talk to the media, or most readily available when a quote or sound bite was required. Below is a list of pointers you can use to weigh up an 'expert'. Although this isn't a definitive checklist, and we should always be prepared for maverick viewpoints, qualified or experienced experts should be able to satisfy most of the following criteria:

1. They have links with a recognised institution (for example, a university, health practice, and/or current membership of a professional organisation).
2. They are transparent about their background (for example, they are not just trying to sell you a product), and can demonstrate awareness of contemporary knowledge and practice in their area.
3. They have recognised (professional) skills. This means they have proven experience in one or more of the following areas: medicine (they are a doctor, nurse, or other health care worker); psychology (they are a psychiatrist, psychologist or certificated counsellor); research or academia (they teach and/or research within a recognised institution); experiential (they are an outreach worker or service user with training in how to liaise with the public).
4. They continually update their skills, and undergo regular training in their area of work.
5. They have professional or political partnerships (see also point 1). This means they can prove that they network with others working in the same area as them.
6. They can demonstrate an awareness of evidence-based and anecdotal information, and differentiate between the two. This means they can tell you what's being talked about in published research, current conferences, and 'grey' literature (informal reports and books in their area).
7. They know about changes in policy in their area of work, and can explain how that might impact on wider society (for example, if there are current changes in how their research is funded, or how a certain health treatment is delivered, they should be aware of this). Where appropriate they should demonstrate how their work taps into policy changes or political developments in research, health care, or academia.
8. They show an awareness of, and respect for difference, and can offer advice or information to people in all parts of society.

You should question 'experts' who appear to:

- Have very poor or low skills in their area of practice.
- Do not seem to have any professional affiliations.
- Use their 'advice' or 'expertise' simply as a means to sell you products.
- Make no effort to link in with other networks, and seem to lack awareness of current developments in their field.
- Continually present theories or ideas that are outdated or prejudiced.
- Or frequently seem to do things covered in the 'can't do' list above.

Remember, 'experts' come in a variety of guises, and you don't have to have a string of letters after your name to be one. However, experts do need to be able to demonstrate their expertise – and have that used appropriately by journalists and others who take the voice of the expert to the public.

Professional Bodies

This list provides a resource where you can find experts and view their professional guidelines.

You can find details of most UK universities here: <http://www.scit.wlv.ac.uk/ukinfo>

[British Medical Association](#)

[British Psychological Society](#)

[British Sociological Association](#)

[British Association \(Information about Science\)](#)

[Central Office for Research Ethics Committees](#)