

Psychiatrists' professional opinions to the media

The Officers of the College have been concerned to learn of a number of instances in which Members or Fellows of the College have made public statements which are not in keeping with the guidelines, 'Psychiatrists professional opinions to the press'. These guidelines were originally published in the *Bulletin* in July 1992 (16, 458), and reappeared in July 1994 (18, 441). The guidelines have now been revised slightly, and are printed below.

In view of the level of concern about breaches of these guidelines, the Executive and Finance Committee has agreed that in future, when breaches of these guidelines are detected, the

Member responsible will receive a warning letter from the President. Repeated violations of a serious nature may lead to the consideration of disciplinary action by the College, in accordance with section IX of the Bye-laws.

Note: These guidelines refer to expressions of opinions in the media, and do not apply when Members are acting in a medico-legal capacity, for instance, in the preparation of court reports.

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Psychiatrists' professional opinions to the media – revised guidelines

The College encourages psychiatrists to provide the media with expert and up-to-date information. The Public Education Department has a list of experts to deal with media enquiries.

Certain precautions need to be taken, especially when there is great pressure by the media for psychiatric opinions about individuals whose behaviour – often criminal or violent – has caused public concern. In these situations, it is essential that psychiatrists should (i) understand that they are absolutely entitled to make no comment; (ii) confine themselves to general statements about the behaviour under discussion and avoid instant opinions about individuals. Psychiatrists should be particularly careful when the reporter is not known to them, or works for a tabloid known for sensational reporting – where the 'reporting' is often the sub-editing of the reporter's original material.

The American Psychiatric Association has issued ethical guidelines on this matter, as follows:

"On occasion psychiatrists are asked for an opinion about an individual who is in the light of public attention, or who has disclosed information about himself through public media. It is unethical for a psychiatrist to offer a professional opinion unless he/she has conducted an examination and has been granted proper authorisation for such a statement."

The College agrees with this principle. Speculations about persons whom a psychiatrist has never met could be damaging, both to the professional and to the profession as a whole.

The Public Education Department is always willing to advise psychiatrists in their dealings with the media.

Special Committee on Unethical Psychiatric Practices
Approved by Council, 18 March 1992
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