

# What the papers say\*

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**Professor Jan Scott conducts a prospective survey of the ways psychiatry is presented in the media.**

In recent years psychiatrists have taken an increasing interest in the presentation of professionals and the speciality in the media. The screen image suggests some cause for concern. Television documentary and drama programmes on mental health issues have received ambivalent responses (Appleby, 1991a; Bhugra, 1988; Bhugra & Scott, 1989). Indeed, the cinema image of the profession may have deteriorated in the last decade (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987). While the 'Dr Dippy' stereotype is still prevalent, this has increasingly been replaced by 'Dr Evil' (exemplified by Hannibal Lecter in 'The Silence of the Lambs').

Few studies have been undertaken of press coverage and most originate outside Britain. In Canada, Matas and colleagues (1985, 1986) undertook a survey to examine the attitudes of four groups of individuals towards mental illness. It suggested that individually, press reporters were no less accepting of mental illness than non-psychiatric medical patients, psychiatric patients or psychiatrists. However, when the three non-reporter groups rated newspaper articles on mental health issues, all viewed the publications as 'negative' or 'mostly negative'. The reporters acknowledged that the demands of the market place and other pressures may have contributed to the less flattering image of psychiatry that they promoted in their writing. A comparative study (Matas *et al.*, 1986) of press coverage of mental health issues in the 1960s and the 1980s demonstrated that the content of newspaper articles and the attitudes expressed were essentially negative and had changed little with time. However, it was noted that when reporters were given access to written information, the accuracy of their articles was greatly improved.

This paper describes a prospective study of the presentation of mental health issues in the British press. The aims of the project were to survey the prevalence and content of articles

published in national and local newspapers and to assess the applicability of the criteria used by Matas and colleagues. The implications of these results for future interactions between psychiatrists and the press are also explored.

## The study

To analyse the presentation of mental illness, mental health professionals and mental health legislation and policies, any articles judged by a media expert to relate to psychiatry (including reviews of books and television programmes) appearing in six national daily newspapers and their associated Sunday papers were collected for three consecutive months. The newspapers were selected to give as broad a range of opinion and political affiliation as possible. Three broadsheet and three tabloid newspapers from right, left and centre of the political spectrum were screened. To allow for differences in national and local news coverage, the six national papers were supplemented by surveying a provincial daily newspaper and its associated Sunday edition.

Each article identified was assessed using a modified version of the rating scale described by Matas *et al.* (1986). Data were recorded under the following five headings: article profile; article content; quality of journalism; scientific accuracy; and article tone and attitudes.

## Findings

In total, 241 mental health related articles were identified, although 45 of these related to reviews of television programmes or books. While there was quite a range in the number of articles in any paper in any month (16–37), excluding book and television reviews, the median prevalence of articles per newspaper per month was 19. On only two occasions did a Sunday paper fail to have any mention of mental health topics. There were no significant differences in the median number of articles published per month in broadsheet ( $n=25$ ) as opposed to tabloid papers ( $n=21$ ). Political affiliation was not associated with any significant differences.

Overall, mental health topics rarely received front page coverage. Nationally, the exception was articles relating to forensic psychiatry.

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mainly debates regarding the mental state of those charged with murder ( $n=19$ ). At a local level, front page coverage was attained on only two occasions when stories relating to rather dramatic failed suicide attempts were reported. No newspaper editorials were dedicated to mental health issues, although eight feature articles (five in broadsheet papers) appeared in the national press. Apart from these special features, articles were generally short (85% were less than 300 words).

Article content suggested a preoccupation with forensic issues or the relationship between mental illness and dangerousness ( $n=49$ ;  $\chi^2=5.4$ ; d.f.1;  $P<0.05$ ). Next in frequency were articles on drug and alcohol related topics, followed by child and adolescent problems, then less specific topics (such as stress, the 'male menopause'). Articles published varied considerably between papers and on only four occasions did more than four newspapers report the same story (on three occasions related to murder trials). A number of articles ( $n=9$ ) arose from themes covered in television programmes and related to such topics as the reasons for an overdose by a character in a popular 'soap'. Seven of these articles were in tabloid papers. Only five articles relating to the causes of mental illness, four articles containing any reference to 'biological' factors (either in causation or treatment), and three articles on mental health policy were found. All but one of these 12 reports were in the broadsheet papers. Broadsheets were significantly more likely to report on aetiology, biology and policy, while tabloids were significantly more likely to report on mental health topics raised by television coverage (Fisher's exact test;  $P=0.05$ ).

Psychiatric jargon was employed liberally throughout the articles reviewed, but on no occasion were any of the terms defined. The four most frequent terms noted in order of occurrence were depression, psychopath, hysteria/hysterical, and psychotic. None of the articles mentioning depression specifically related to a discussion of depressive disorders. Murder trial reports frequently quoted the opposing evidence given by expert psychiatric witnesses, but in only eight articles was a psychiatrist's opinion on an issue directly quoted by the reporter. Eight articles quoted either academic research ( $n=6$ ) or available statistics on mental health ( $n=2$ ). While voluntary or other agencies were quoted ( $n=19$ ) more often than psychiatrists, the largest number of 'expert opinions' were given by other individuals ( $n=31$ ), who described their professional status in various terms (e.g. chiropractors, hypnotists, psychotherapists, counsellors). Psychiatrists were significantly less likely to be quoted than other agencies or other individuals ( $\chi^2=6.1$ ; d.f. 2;  $P<0.05$ ).

The tone and attitude of the articles describing psychiatrists and individuals with mental health problems were predominantly negative. There was a trend for female journalists to be more sympathetic than males, but this may relate to the fact that they more frequently contributed to problem pages, special feature articles or reports on treatment, rather than to articles on forensic issues. The latter frequently promoted the view that dangerousness is synonymous with mental illness. Other articles, unrelated to forensic topics, tended to ridicule psychiatrists (although where individuals were interviewed for such articles, few were actually psychiatrists or employed in the NHS in any capacity). Some national press coverage relating to individuals was remarkably unsympathetic. For example, an elderly man who attempted to commit suicide by leaping from a hospital window was identified by the headline 'You Old Fall'.

### Comment

The results of this preliminary study suggest that nearly every day tabloid and broadsheet newspaper from across the political spectrum carry an article which relates to mental health. In this selected study, potential biases in collection or analysis of articles cannot be entirely excluded. Nevertheless, the methodology does seem to be feasible and a longer study using blind independent raters should provide more reliable data on the articles published. This study demonstrates some issues worthy of consideration.

The coverage of psychiatry appears to be skewed towards forensic psychiatry. This topic also receives the most prominence, with reports frequently making the front page. No other mental health issue gains more attention from national reporters than two expert witnesses debating the mental health of an individual accused of murder. At a local level, suicidal behaviour may gain front page coverage. Given the potential drama of such stories, these findings are hardly surprising. However, the image of psychiatry presented reinforces public perceptions of the mentally ill as dangerous individuals (to themselves or others). The interface with the legal system also presents psychiatry at its most complex. Attempts by journalists to simplify the reporting can produce misinformation through inaccurate use of jargon or reduce the issue to an unhelpful 'mad or bad' debate. These factors, plus the generally low level of scientific accuracy and unsympathetic views of psychiatrists and the mentally ill, may explain individual reticence towards engaging in media interviews. On some occasions journalists may have sought background information from professionals which was not then acknowledged, however, as it was

noticeable that few mental health experts were named or quoted. One conclusion from this project is that if professionals do not make themselves available, other individuals willing to be quoted provide the 'expert' opinion in their place. This must be seen as a cause of concern as the general public cannot be expected to know that these individuals are not necessarily recognised by professional or voluntary organisations as being qualified to give such opinions.

Newspaper coverage of psychiatry may reflect the opinions of its readers or influence such opinions. It was noteworthy that when it comes to mental health issues, the national press appears less decisive and rarely follows the same story. Papers tended to publish on quite different topics. Special 'educational' features tend to be a feature of the broadsheets. As these offer an opportunity to inform public views on causation and treatment, it is noteworthy that the trend appears to be towards social rather than psychosocial models of illness. Tabloid feature articles were more frequently stimulated by television coverage of a specific issue, thus mirroring other media attention.

While psychiatrists may be anxious that distorted presentations of their views will damage their speciality or reputation, it is important to stress the need to be pro-active. It is futile to shout 'foul' about misinformation provided by other 'experts', if those individuals with expertise and knowledge refuse to engage in a dialogue with a journalist. Matas *et al* (1986) showed that providing background information improves the accuracy of articles published. Those who feel unable to comment themselves might direct the reporter to another colleague or at least consider providing some reference materials. Developing a rapport with individual journalists also reduces the potential for misrepresentations (Appleby, 1991b).

The media influence on public opinion and attitudes may directly or indirectly affect the

stigmatisation of individuals suffering from mental illness, the recruitment of mental health professionals (Scott, 1986) and the allocation of resources for both clinical and research activities. As such it is an issue that we ignore at our peril. Unfair stereotypes are not unique to psychiatry, but it is appropriate to further investigate if the high level of public and media interest in the speciality can be turned to some advantage. As Oscar Wilde remarked "There's only one thing that's worse than being talked about, and that's not being talked about".

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