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extra

Destigmatising mental illness, House style

Shabbir Amanullah

David Shore and Paul Attanasio have done for mental health what many public education series have not been able to do: tackle stigma head on.

By portraying a narcissistic individual with brilliant diagnostic skills and an ability to say what many on occasion would like to but don't for fear of losing their licence, Hugh Laurie made *House* one of the most popular of TV serials. His character is a potent combination of genius and anger admired by all. 'He got it right, didn't he?'

House's breakdown and hospital admission showed how mental illness can affect anyone and, maybe more likely, the brilliant. Movies like *Rain Man* and *A Beautiful Mind* had an impact but mainly on those who identified with mental illness, because of either the nature of their work or personal circumstances. These movies were illness-based and to some extent predictable. *House*, on the other hand, by depicting a 'normal' physician becoming ill has comfortably punctured the 'will always be ill' myth. Recovering physicians fear being treated 'differently'. They often wonder how it would have been if they were admitted to the local psychiatric unit.

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest left an indelible negative image of psychiatry and how mental illness is treated and such a clear depiction of treatability combined with a fresh doctor–patient interface was long overdue. It may be early days to study the impact *House's* admission and treatment has had on the public but we should capitalise on this and target the stigma that resides within and then without.

As a physicians' body, we must strive to dispel myths about mental illness making the person 'incompetent'. Nothing can be farther from the truth – even *House* agrees!

The British Journal of Psychiatry (2010)
197, 377. doi: 10.1192/bjp.197.5.377