

In a thoughtful epilogue on 'The Late Show', Michael Ignatieff, who has a grim family history of the disease, accuses the poet of offering too much hope! He is referring to the one sequence which I shall treasure. Enter guitarist Richard Muttonchops (*sic*), who serenades the ladies with "Oh, you beautiful

doll", Cringe-making? Possibly – until Maria gives him her wonderful 'A' and Kathleen first sways and then claps to the rhythm! Music, for the moment, makes a link between these lost souls and the world they have almost left.

Psychiatric Bulletin (1993), 17, 673–674

Mental illness in British newspapers

(or My Girlfriend is a Rover Metro)

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The main source of topical information in most parts of the world is through the mass media – principally newspapers and television. Television news and current affairs have a duty to remain impartial, as they provide a service for the whole population. Newspapers, on the other hand, have a greater journalistic and editorial freedom as they target subgroups. British newspapers are currently being scrutinised as to how they report both factual and speculative information of a general kind. At the same time there seems to be an increase in their interest in psychological matters. However, work on newspaper reporting of psychiatric disorders (Day & Page, 1986; Matas *et al*, 1986) has shown that the mentally ill are usually portrayed in a rather negative light with few positive images.

The study

We have recently examined two different formats of newspaper; 'broadsheet' (*The Independent*) and 'tabloid' (*The Mirror*), collecting all reports related to mental illness over the three months from October to December 1992. *The Mirror* has average daily sales of around 3.5 million, while *The Independent's* circulation averages around 368,000.

Findings

The survey yielded a total of 55 reports in '*The Mirror*' and 46 in '*The Independent*', and these reports were divided up into four groups. The first group included those reports giving information

about mental illness, and these totalled 7 (13%) in *The Mirror* and 15 (33%) in *The Independent*. Of the broadsheet articles, 13 were written by journalists and two by medically trained writers. They covered a wide range of illnesses, and six of the articles reported directly on published work in psychiatric journals as part of a regular review of medical literature. In contrast to this, the tabloid newspaper, with only seven articles, had no reports on scientific research, and over half of the articles were written by the newspaper's resident medical journalist, a practising general practitioner.

Reports of individual cases of mental illness formed the second group, and yielded 39 (71%) tabloid and 20 (43%) broadsheet items. Despite the large numbers of cases reported on, only seven were reported in both newspapers. This meant a total of 52 cases, 31 of which related to criminal acts or suicide.

The tabloid newspaper contained a much greater proportion of reports of suicides, 12 (31%) compared with two (10%), and these typically in unusual or otherwise noteworthy circumstances ('Love-rift tycoon's suicide horror', 'Santa's suicide plunge', 'Suicide of pilot who nearly hit a hotel'). In total, nine cases of people with identifiable psychotic illness were reported, and in all these cases the circumstances involved violent crime or murder. Of those cases concerning non-psychotic illness, all the reports (11 in total) linked the illness to unusual and generally humorous presentations ('Bizarre bagpipe phobia baffles doctors', 'Student stuns shrinks, "My girlfriend is a Rover Metro"', 'Little boy eats nothing but Spam'). Nine further articles mentioned doctors working in the psychiatric field, all but two

suggesting negligent practice. From the remaining nine articles it was impossible to establish a clear diagnosis, and usually the report indicated that the person involved was "receiving psychiatric help". In all of these instances the person was accused of murder.

The tabloid paper contained nine examples of 'tabloid terminology', where adjectives which have become associated with the mentally ill are used to describe those unlikely to be so. Typical examples of this style include '... evil psycho jailed for life', 'crazed husband ... stabs his wife to death' and 'drug-crazed madman holds a baby to ransom.'

While both newspapers have sections for readers' letters to the Editor, only in the broadsheet paper did any of these concern mental illness topics. Here a total of 11 letters were printed, the majority of which concerned a lively debate over the use of electroconvulsive treatment. The letters were written by psychiatrists, former patients and other laymen.

These results are, we feel, in themselves not surprising. In keeping with the earlier studies of Day & Page (1986) and Matas *et al* (1986), we found that the mentally ill were portrayed almost exclusively in a negative light, with no positive images at all in the tabloid paper. Both papers tended to report the mentally ill conforming to obvious stereotypes. Patients suffering from psychotic illness were presented as violent criminals, committing murder or rape. Those suffering from non-psychotic illnesses were figures of fun, more to be pitied or laughed at than understood.

In the vast majority of cases the tabloid newspaper reported in a sensationalist style, and large print 'banner' headlines were often used. In a number of cases these were actually misleading as to the content of the report (Rapist fools docs with "I'm mad" plea').

Comment

Community care schemes for the mentally ill cannot succeed if there is still fear and stigmatisation in society (Brockington *et al*, 1993). As long as newspapers perpetuate stereotypes of the mentally ill, community acceptance will remain difficult. Indeed, a prospective study (Appleby & Wessely, 1988) has indicated that reporting of violent crime significantly affects general attitudes to the mentally ill. While the Press Council recognises the need for responsibility in the press, it is perhaps idealistic to expect a

dramatic change in a newspaper's approach given their need to ensure circulation. Psychiatry needs a more pragmatic attitude.

However, it is unfair to lay all the blame for the negative portrayal of mental illness at the feet of the press and the news media have been shown to be useful vehicle for imparting medical knowledge to lay communities (Marcos, 1989). We feel that psychiatrists should use the media to their patients' advantage, yet as a discipline we have been slow to develop skills for dealing with the media – although there are notable exceptions (Clare, 1976).

Television and newspaper 'Doc-spots' in general appear to be popular with the public. We suggest that in a similar fashion, psychiatrists need to become ambassadors for mental health issues, thereby increasing knowledge, understanding and ultimately acceptance of mental illness.

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OPINIONS WANTED. What is your view of how the media handle psychiatry? Does it interest, intrigue or inflame you? This month a regular column begins in the *Bulletin*, addressing issues raised by the representation of psychiatry in the press and the arts. Articles by regular contributors (Simon Wessley, Brice Pitt, Louis Appleby) will comment on mental illness or psychology as it is portrayed in books or broadcasts.

Unsolicited articles are welcome on any media-related topic. Please send your contribution, which should be 500–1,000 words in length, to the media editor.