

EDITORIAL

Why psychiatry should engage with the media

Claire Bithell

Claire Bithell is Head of Mental Health at the Science Media Centre. She has 8 years' experience communicating high-profile science and health topics to the national news media, both in her previous roles at the Science Media Centre and also when managing the press office at the Human Tissue Authority. Claire has a degree in cell biology and a PhD in biochemistry from the University of Manchester. **Correspondence** Dr Claire Bithell, Science Media Centre, 21 Albemarle Street, London W1S 4BS, UK. Email: cbithell@ri.ac.uk

SUMMARY

Psychiatry receives less media coverage than general medicine, and the coverage it does receive is four times as likely to be negatively framed. In addition, coverage of mental health problems is often negative in tone and mental health research tends to be underrepresented in the media. As the media is likely to be a key source of information for the general public about mental health and psychiatry, this is worrying. There are opportunities, however, to change this landscape; the UK national news media are keen to cover more stories about mental health problems and to feature more psychiatrists' comments in their coverage. By engaging with the media, psychiatrists have the chance to create better-informed media narrative.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

C.B is Head of Mental Health at the Science Media Centre.

The UK Science Media Centre (SMC) is an independent press office set up specifically to deal with the more controversial science stories that hit the headlines. Established in 2002 in the wake of science stories such as GM crops and MMR, the SMC has been a major success story, helping scientists to make their voices heard on breaking news stories, running almost 100 press conferences a year and being used routinely by every major news organisation in the UK.

In May 2010, the SMC appointed a new press officer dedicated solely to mental health research. This topic is a good fit with the remit of the SMC: it is an area that is often high profile, controversial and presents numerous communications challenges. Work so far shows that there are many opportunities for psychiatrists who care about the way their specialty is portrayed in the national news media and who want the public to know more about mental health problems and their treatments.

Coverage of mental health problems and psychiatry in the media is often negative

Analysis of UK media finds that coverage of mental health problems tends to be negative in

tone and to link mental health problems with violence (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, 2005; Callard 2008). There is concern that such coverage reinforces the stigma surrounding mental health problems. Interestingly, psychiatry receives less coverage than general medicine, and the coverage it does receive is four times as likely to be negatively framed (Lawrie 2000). Disquiet about this was voiced frequently in the meetings held during a recent SMC consultation on mental health research and the media (Bithell 2010). There was almost universal unease that psychiatry is not always represented in the best light and concern that this can lead to confusion about the role of psychiatry and may affect whether people with mental health problems seek help.

In addition, mental health research attracts less press coverage than other areas of medicine (Huang 2003). Media interest in research into illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, stroke and diabetes provides an opportunity for clinicians to disseminate basic information about these conditions to the public. Through the media, they can inform people about prevalence, symptoms, diagnosis and treatments, and deliver messages about the importance of research. So lack of media coverage of mental health research means that an opportunity to communicate through the media is being missed. However, SMC work over the past 6 months shows that journalists are keen to cover more mental health research.

There are challenges in communicating psychiatry to the media

There is no doubt that communication of psychiatry to the media presents specific challenges. During our consultation, psychiatrists and press officers cited as major stumbling blocks the complexity of the area and the fact there are few simple messages to relay. There was also concern that diversity of opinion could appear in the media as conflict, or that spokespeople would be put up for interview against patient groups or people who believe that psychiatry or mental health treatments are fundamentally damaging.

Another difficulty in communicating psychiatry is that the public and journalists are more likely to

hold strong views about mental health than about other areas of health or medicine. For example, some experts in our consultation who have spoken to media had the impression that journalists' personal views about mental illness made it more difficult to engage with them. Some researchers described feeling almost envious of those in specialties such as particle physics or molecular biology, about which the public or news journalists are unlikely to have strong preconceptions.

It is also a communication challenge that psychiatry is often misunderstood by those outside the field. Many participants in the SMC consultation felt that the nature of psychiatry as a valuable field of medicine for treating people with severe mental illness was not widely appreciated by the public or even by those in other medical specialties. News media offer an opportunity to explain the role of the psychiatrist and the way that psychiatrists work. When journalists are writing stories on mental health, comment from psychiatrists will give background information and provide the public with a better understanding.

It is important to note that the same issues that create communication challenges also make the field attractive to the media; areas where there are information gaps, debate, uncertainty and complexity tend to make great news and media features. The SMC has seen that other topics with these qualities, such as fertility science, stem cells, climate change and microbiology, translate into interesting media stories that provide an opportunity to communicate important messages to the public. News journalists look specifically to cover stories that are at the cutting edge of medicine and science and those that have an ethical dimension. As John Williams, Head of the Department of Neuroscience and Mental Health at the Wellcome Trust, said during the SMC consultation:

'Mental health is complex, nuanced and there are ethical, societal and sociological components. However, there are analogies to other complex areas of research that have been portrayed accurately in the media e.g. stem cells or fertility.' (Bithell 2010)

The media is interested in psychiatry – there are many opportunities

There is great scope for more coverage of mental health research and psychiatry in the national news media and there are many opportunities for psychiatrists to get involved. All national news journalists I have spoken to (including those from *The Times*, *Daily Mail*, *Express*, *Mirror*, *Independent* and *Guardian*) would like to cover more mental health research and more about psychiatry in general. Press briefings on psychiatry and mental

health held by the SMC have a higher than average attendance by national news journalists and good levels of media coverage.

The SMC has run press briefings on topical issues such as diagnosis of mental health problems, forensic psychiatry, secure mental health hospitals, and alcohol and drug interventions in schools. It is clear from the feedback following these briefings that journalists are keen to hear more about the debates going on within psychiatry, and that hearing about these issues from psychiatrists will shape future media coverage. If you think there are debates going on in your field that will be of interest to the media, you can get in touch with the SMC, either direct or through me.

A strong theme from the SMC consultation is that there are not enough experts who know about mental health research speaking in the media. Both researchers and journalists cite one or two people who do a large amount of media work, but the majority do not engage – and this is particularly true in the field of psychiatry. Journalists I spoke to during the consultation period (Bithell 2010) said that they would benefit from having more spokespeople to contact. One national news journalist told me:

'I cannot name an expert in psychiatry or mental health research off the top of my head, but I could give you a long list of experts on stem cells or cardiology.'

Jeremy Laurance, Health Editor of the *Independent*, remarked:

'I could always do with more experts. The key thing though is to find experts who are willing to answer their mobile and respond to queries – they are few and far between.'

This means that there are many opportunities for those who would like to act as spokespeople. The SMC needs more psychiatrists to speak to journalists about their area of work, and can give support and advice if you want to engage with the media.

Reasons to speak to the media

It can be hard for busy clinicians and academics with so many conflicting priorities to find time to do media work. But professionals working in a field like psychiatry, which many feel is misunderstood, have much to gain from communicating with the media. An Ipsos MORI poll commissioned by the SMC in 2002 found that 90% of the public get at least some of their information about science from the media (Ipsos MORI 2002). The SMC hopes to carry out a similar poll in the next year to examine whether the public still relies on the media for information, as well as investigating the role of new

media in informing the public's view. By engaging with the media and having your opinions heard by the public you can change the way your work will be perceived in future. Improving public understanding of mental health problems and their treatments may help remove stigma from mental illness. Other benefits of doing media work that researchers and clinicians have reported to the SMC include new funding opportunities, new collaborations, attracting better students and staff, and more citations for research papers. Another compelling reason to engage with the media is that if you don't, someone else will and that person may not be as well qualified to comment as you are.

Although many scientists and clinicians fear engagement with the media, the SMC now has 8 years of remarkably positive experiences under its belt. All the evidence shows that, if done effectively, engaging with the media can be a positive experience for psychiatrists as well as improving the quality of media coverage of psychiatry.

Getting involved

This editorial is concerned predominantly with why psychiatry should engage with the media – in a future article in *Advances* I will examine how you can get involved. But if I have inspired you to get involved now, there are a number of places that can support you. If you are a member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists you can approach them to go on their media database and they may be able to give you advice and access to media training courses (for further information go to www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pressparliament.aspx or email efox@rcpsych.ac.uk). The SMC is interested in hearing from you if you are working on a high-profile issue that is difficult to communicate. We can provide support to launch new work and help getting your voice heard in the media. We are also looking for people who are happy to be interviewed on their specialty by national news media. In addition, you should get to know your institution's

press office, which may be able to raise the profile of your work and give you support should you find that your area is attracting media interest.

Conclusions

There is much to be gained from engaging with the media and many opportunities exist for psychiatrists who want to do media work. Working with the media offers a valuable chance to communicate directly to the public, and to improve understanding of mental health problems and the role of psychiatry in their treatment. This all ties into the ethos that is central to the SMC: that the media will cover mental health better when mental health experts do media better.

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