

Psychiatry and the media

Jazzing up the journals

LOUIS APPLEBY, Lecturer, Institute of Psychiatry, Denmark Hill, London SE5 8AF

People who wrote to Radio 4's 'All in the Mind' after it tackled myalgic encephalitis called it biased, simplistic, ghastly, insensitive, patronising, misleading and rubbish. More letters arrived than for any other topic in the programme's three series, many of them demanding a second item on ME to set the record straight. When that had been duly broadcast, there were demands for a third.

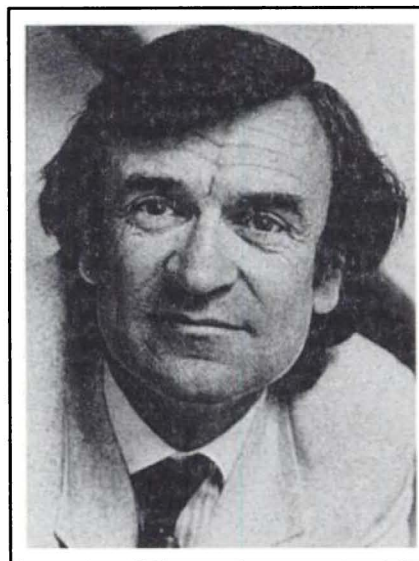
It's said that, to be comfortable on television, you should imagine you're addressing only one viewer. So, when it was my turn to sidle up to the studio microphone, I sometimes pictured one typical radio listener, usually a motorist trapped in a jam near Chiswick. But no-one I envisaged seemed to be the sort of person from whom the letters came. Who, for instance, wrote that, come the revolution, first against the wall should be "estate agents, Tories, Spud-U-Like shopowners and psychiatrists"?

'All in the Mind' is Radio 4's first attempt at a psychiatry magazine so the public response provides a new reflection of popular interest and opinion. Even though those who write in are presumably far from a cross section of those who listen, they make up for being a skewed sample by being a motivated one. Motivated enough to send volumes of tightly-typed comments or, in the case of ME, to request a complete transcript of the programme.

Responses to my own talking slot were more muted. It was my job to jazz up the journals, to provide a run down of published case reports, illustrating some current theme in mental health. Professional readers were required for the journal quotes and one of them was generous enough to say my scripts were more interesting than what he usually read, which was the shipping forecast. Listeners, though, simply asked where they could find out more than I had had time to say.

According to editor Michael Ember, requests for more information are one of three kinds of letter the programme attracts. There is also a poignant, desperate variety, describing illness or fear of illness or seeking help – always addressed to Anthony Clare, the presenter. If you add his disembodied voice to the formality of the medium, clearly you create a powerful pull.

The third type of correspondent is plain quirky and not confined to 'All in the Mind'. On Michael Ember's wall is the archetypal example, prompted by another of his programmes. It runs: "Dear Sir, I have



Professor Anthony Clare

been listening to Stop the Week for five years. It's crap. With best wishes, . . ."

The gush of ME mail was in all three categories, or else one of its own. What had been said by that week's pundit, Peter White, to kindle such ferocity? Quite simply, he had suggested a place for psychiatry in the treatment of a physical complaint. He had dared to claim an overlap of the mind and the body. The reaction confirmed ME not as a vanguard of new virology but as a bastion of anti-psychiatric prejudice.

But there was good news too. One correspondent called the item hopeful, another said she had "practically cheered". And from all the letters on other subjects, whether questioning, confessing or disputing, what emerged most was something just as emphatic and more encouraging than prejudice: a voyeuristic intrigue on matters psychological, one that many psychiatrists would share but not admit, and a readiness to understand behavioural deviance in mental, individual terms rather than say, sociological or moral. It's tempting to say we're no nation of shopkeepers – happily for one listener, not even Spud-U-Like shopkeepers. What we may be is a society of lay psychiatrists.