

Media and Mental Health: Breaking Down Stigma and Challenging Inaccuracies



A Collection of Unique Perspectives

Mental health conditions, ranging from anxiety to schizophrenia, afflict millions of individuals throughout the world each year. Despite the global prominence of these conditions, mental health continues to be overlooked in the global health community. At the 2012 Pacific Health Summit, health journalists expressed their frustration about both the lack of support for quality reporting on mental health and the need to better inform policymakers and the public about the issues. As a follow-up to the Summit discussion, NBR spoke with leading health journalists and media representatives to gather their insights on the role of media in raising awareness about mental health issues in developed and developing countries.

Contributors



Claire Bithell is Head of Mental Health at the Science Media Centre (SMC), an independent venture working to promote the voices, stories, and views of the scientific community in the UK news media. Ms. Bithell has ten years experience communicating high-profile science and health issues to the media, both in previous roles at the Science Media Centre and at the UK health regulator, the Human Tissue Authority.



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Anso Thom is Print Editor for Health-e News Service in South Africa. She has been a journalist for the past 22 years and has worked on the health beat since 1997. Her work focuses on developmental public health issues. Ms. Thom is the co-author of *The Virus, Vegetables and Vitamins*, a book chronicling the political discourse on HIV/AIDS in South Africa. She won the CNN African Health

Journalist Award for HIV journalism and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation Award for Excellence in Health Reporting.

Q At the 2012 Pacific Health Summit, a number of health journalists expressed frustration regarding the lack of interest and support for quality reporting on mental health issues, both in developing and developed countries. As journalists, what are the principal barriers that you see to effectively reporting on mental health—in general and in your country? Why do these barriers persist?

Anso Thom

I believe one of the principal barriers is the stigma associated with mental health. Secondly, mental health illnesses are hugely un-, mis-, and under-diagnosed, and therefore many people don't know they may be living with a condition associated with mental health. So while we may be able to report extensively on, for example, research and statistics related to mental health, it is very hard to find people living with mental illnesses who are prepared to share their stories. And we all know that to tell a powerful story, we need that human-interest angle.

Another challenge we as journalists face is gaining access to institutions where mental health patients are treated—obviously, this would be for more severe cases requiring institutionalization. Government facilities are not accessible, so it is very hard to gain access to these places without literally going undercover.

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Anso Thom

which is manifested in high levels of gender violence, child abuse, crime, suicide, aggression, and so on.

Claire Bithell

Mental health problems do not receive nearly as much media coverage in the UK as other health conditions, such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, or infectious disease. In 2011, I carried out a consultation, speaking to key national news journalists, press officers, and researchers to find out what the main barriers to reporting mental health problems were. All three groups expressed frustration about the lack of media coverage and cited many barriers, including that mental health problems are still stigmatized and not as widely discussed as other health conditions, that newspaper editors may not understand how prevalent such problems are, and that there were fewer press officers with a role in finding and promoting strong mental health stories and helping journalists find credible experts.

I was also interested in why, despite having an excellent research base in the UK, mental health research is rarely covered in the media. This is important because reporting of research promotes

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...The reluctance is the greatest when the issues are most severe.

Edward Campion

awareness of disorders and their treatments and has made a big difference in increasing understanding of other health issues such as cancer. In the past, mental health research has not had the prestige of other areas and has not received the same level of funding. Things have changed, however, and it is widely acknowledged that this is a very exciting time for mental health research; new funding and techniques such as brain imaging and genetics are helping researchers make huge jumps forward in our understanding of mental health conditions. These important research findings are interesting to the public—people are more likely to experience a mental health problem or know someone with a mental health problem—and therefore are interesting to journalists.

Mohuya Chaudhuri

In an age where controversies, politics, and financial scams dominate the news, issues like mental health are extremely low on an editor's priority list. Issues that are controversial are perceived to be attractive to readers or viewers, but such hooks are often hard to find in covering mental health. Cases like suicide are an exception; though voyeuristic, the

newsroom believes that suicides are newsworthy because of the sensational act of taking one's life.

From an educational angle, mental health studies or surveys do often generate stories. But generically these opportunities are few, as the lack of adequate data in this field makes it difficult to build robust reports.

Edward Campion

Even in highly educated populations in developed countries, there is a persistent reluctance to discuss mental health issues. And the reluctance is the greatest when the issues are most severe. Suicide, major depression, dementia, schizophrenia, alcoholism, and drug abuse are topics that make people uncomfortable and thus can be overwhelming. To a greater degree than medical diseases, mental health conditions carry stigma, shame, and even blame. Reinforcing those reactions are centuries of cultural and religious perspectives that were suspicious, judgmental, lacking in compassion, and based more on prejudice than understanding.

Q ■ **What are the repercussions of the deficit of media coverage on mental health issues?**

Claire Bithell

Many surveys have found that the public gets a lot of its information about health from the media. This means the deficit of coverage translates into a deficit of knowledge about mental health problems. In the UK, it is still the norm for most people to know little about these problems. For example, the average person may not know about the symptoms, prevalence, or treatments for conditions such as anxiety, depression, or schizophrenia. Worryingly, there is often still the feeling that someone who is

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Mohuya Chaudhuri

suffering with a mental health problem such as anxiety or depression should “pull themselves together,” and many still debate whether conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder even exist.

Lack of awareness and the stigma of being labeled as having a mental health disorder can prevent people from seeking help. Research estimates that, although around 164.8 million people in Europe have a mental disorder, only a third receive treatment. This means many people are living with hugely debilitating illnesses for years, and we now understand that for many conditions, such as schizophrenia, the earlier a person gets effective treatment, the better the long-term outcome.

Edward Campion

Stigma and shame are reinforced when there is tacit agreement not to discuss mental health problems. As a result, holding useful discussions is a challenge because they must start with an understanding of the facts about diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment. Discussions need to educate and teach in a way that is honest about the problems, while being encouraging about the options for treatment. Objectivity and balance are key to explaining how mental health problems can be better managed. Cures and quick solutions are rare, but there are treatments that can improve lives of both patients and their families.

Education and understanding can help de-stigmatize mental illness, which in itself helps reduce suffering.

Mohuya Chaudhuri

When the media ignores crucial health issues, they remain off the radar of both policymakers and the public. There are a number of health problems—such as malaria, diarrhea, acute respiratory infection, maternal mortality, and mental health—that are not considered newsworthy, and partially because of the lack of coverage, the government has not taken proper action to tackle them.

As a result, there is no well-crafted policy related to mental health in India. Most institutions do not even have mental health facilities. Only a few dedicated ones exist today, and they are unable to cope with the number of caseloads. Lack of awareness means many geriatric patients go untreated and their families struggle to cope with diseases like Alzheimer’s, Parkinsonism, and depression, simply because they can’t recognize the symptoms. As India ages and the elderly population increases, the burden of mental health problems will only increase. Without awareness, many people will continue to struggle with these illnesses.

Anso Thom

Mental illness remains a silent epidemic, so it is not a policy priority. The move has been to deinstitutionalize mental healthcare in South Africa, yet we are unable to understand what the impact has been. Where are patients being treated? Do we have the health workers to treat them? How do people know and understand if they have a mental illness? Are we diagnosing people? Are health workers trained to do so? The questions are not really different from many other health challenges, yet we fail to ask them.

Q ■ The term “mental health disorder” encompasses a wide spectrum of very different conditions. Are some mental health issues more or less newsworthy than others in your country? Which ones, and why?

Mohuya Chaudhuri

The common perception in the general population is that mental health problems belong to the developed world. Countries that are developing do not have these conditions. Because so little dissemination of mental health information exists in developing countries like India, few learn to recognize mental ailments. Even today, the term mental health stands for “madness,” neurosis, schizophrenia, or epilepsy. There is a great deal of confusion related to mental health. For most, it is undefined and connected only to aging. Even depression, which is widespread in India in both urban and rural settings, is not recognized or discussed.

Possibly the only event that is consistently linked to mental health is when a child, adolescent, or young adult commits suicide. Only when there is perceived aberration, or so called unnatural behavior, will the media report on the issue.

Anso Thom

Suicides are reported on in South Africa, but there is very little engagement on the underlying issues. The same is true for issues such as gender violence and depression. The media is very good at reporting on the symptoms of mental health disorders, but there is no drive in the public and private spheres to tackle the underlying issues.

Claire Bithell

In the UK, certain conditions spark more media

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Anso Thom

attention than others, often because they fit within a wider narrative. The UK’s obsession with weight and dieting, for example, may be one reason for the media’s interest in eating disorders such as anorexia. Likewise, there is often interest in forensic psychology or psychiatry related to a high-profile murder. Alzheimer’s disease and dementia receive a large amount of media coverage, particularly research into prevalence, causes, and treatments. This is partly due to the fact that dementia is a growing issue with our aging population and is currently untreatable, but it is also because disease charities, clinicians, relatives of those affected, and researchers have worked hard to build awareness of the prevalence and burden of the condition. Media coverage is one reason there has been an increase in awareness about the disorder and public support for research and improvements in treatments and care. This gives hope for other prevalent mental conditions, such as depression and anxiety disorders, where there currently isn’t a huge amount of media attention, but where those involved could do much to increase awareness.

Edward Campion

When an important, well-known person can be honest and open about how they have received help coping with mental health problems, it can have a powerful effect on public attitudes. The leaders in a society, including those in sports and entertainment, are

in a unique position to make difficult topics approachable. With the help of press and media, they can educate people and reduce the stigma attached to mental disorders.

Q. Do stereotypes of people with mental health disorders—sometimes perpetuated by unfair or inaccurate depictions of a disease by sensational journalism or pop culture—make communicating an accurate account of the disease, and the people living with it, more difficult? How can the media play a role in breaking down stereotypes?

Edward Campion

One of the major challenges in coping with mental health problems is to overcome the stereotypes, prejudices, and misinformation that are so prevalent. Three strategies can help tackle the problem from different angles. First, let people learn about the ongoing major scientific research on mental diseases and hear the opinions of respected medical experts. Second, use examples where prominent people have made public their experiences with mental health problems. Third, emphasize the public health perspective, including the cost and burden of mental illness for virtually every sector of society, including government, the military, educational institutions, and private companies. Prevention and early intervention can improve productivity as well as improve the lives of those with mental health problems and their families.

Claire Bithell

In popular culture, people with mental health

The media is a reflection of society. Since there is little knowledge and a lot of ignorance about mental health issues, news reports tend to reflect that reality...

Mohuya Chaudhuri

problems are often portrayed as scary and unpredictable or weak, so there is much the media can do to break down damaging stereotypes. Most importantly, people should know that any of us could be afflicted with a mental health problem at any stage of our lives, and that the cause is a complex interplay between biological factors such as a person's genetic makeup and environmental factors.

On a more positive note, it is important to know that people do recover and get better. The "Time to Change" campaign has made a huge difference in the UK in addressing stereotypes and giving a voice to celebrities and members of the public who have mental health problems. In my role publicizing mental health research, case studies are important to illustrate a story. There are some fantastic people, often working with UK health charities, who bravely speak about their experiences in comment or interview pieces alongside articles about research. Giving people a voice is essential to counteract stereotypes.

Mohuya Chaudhuri

The media is a reflection of society. Since there is little knowledge and a lot of ignorance about mental

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Anso Thom

health issues, news reports tend to reflect that reality. To make a difference, there needs to be a dialogue between various stakeholders, such as medical experts and families who are dealing with mental health problems, and the media. Journalists must be engaged and sensitized, perhaps through interactive workshops where they learn about mental health, share data, and speak to patients who have suffered from mental ailments. A campaign can be a valuable way to kick-start such an effort. Once journalists are made aware, news reports will reflect that change.

Anso Thom

Negative stereotypes make reporting on mental health issues more difficult in that those involved—patients, those living with mental illness, or health workers—are reluctant to engage with the media because they find it hard to trust that journalists will tell their stories in a manner that does not further reinforce stigmas. Like the media in South Africa did with HIV, which was highly stigmatized and still is in some communities, we need to find the people who are prepared to talk and tell their stories. There is also an urgent need for the media to understand what policies

should be put in place, ask where these policies are in the chain, and monitor implementation. I also think it is important that journalists deal with the cultural approaches to mental health and how mental illness manifests, which can vary greatly.

Q - Is it difficult to manage the line between advocacy and reporting? Are there moments when it is appropriate for a journalist to be an advocate?

Anso Thom

Absolutely. I believe that you cannot be a health reporter if you are not an advocate in some form or another. But then I also believe that being an advocate is simply about being a good journalist. There are reporters and then there are journalists. Reporters simply report on issues with no real engagement, and it can often be a one-off. Journalists report on issues in a way that affects the political and public discourse and ultimately plays some small role in increasing the pressure that, hopefully, eventually brings change. For example, with HIV, we faced an extraordinary challenge that called for an extraordinary response, and I believe that a number of journalists rose to the occasion without sacrificing their professional integrity or blurring the lines of editorial independence.

Claire Bithell

The UK health correspondents who I work with would, I think, see themselves as news journalists and would be uncomfortable with the idea of being advocates. It is their role to report the most interesting and important health news relevant to their audience. They are also there to hold researchers, clinicians, and

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Claire Bithell

politicians accountable and scrutinize research and policy. But I would argue that this is not a barrier; journalists do not need to be advocates to want to increase and improve the amount of media coverage devoted to mental health problems, because the facts speak for themselves.

Historically, we have underestimated the prevalence of mental health problems, but recent research suggests that in any year over a third of the European population suffers from a mental disorder. The most prevalent conditions, such as anxiety disorders and depression, can strike at any age and be hugely debilitating. A well-respected study in 2011 estimated that about 13% of global disease is due to disorders of the brain, a figure that surpasses both cancer and cardiovascular disease. What is needed is a better dialogue between researchers, clinicians, and those experiencing mental health disorders and journalists. Health correspondents have a very wide brief, and mental health stories have to compete with a vast number of other issues. So those involved with mental health need to speak loudly and compellingly to make sure their voice is heard.

Mohuya Chaudhuri

The role of journalists cannot be that of an advocate. A journalist can only present evidence or facts related to an issue. Media campaigns often do end up pushing a cause in the public domain. But if journalists begin to engage in advocacy, reporting becomes biased and that has a negative impact.

For example, HIV became a big issue in the media. In India, unlike other countries, journalists did not pursue the advocacy route, instead they relied on fact-based sources to drive conversation around HIV. Civil society organizations interacted with the media frequently, providing data, relevant case studies, and information on changing trends. This helped strengthen the quality of news reporting, and in turn the solid and sustained reporting helped drive policy change.

Edward Campion

Merely by shedding light on uncomfortable, unfamiliar topics, journalists are in effect becoming advocates, even without supporting a particular agenda for solutions. Enabling people to see difficult facts about health crises—especially among those with the least resources—is a most appropriate form of advocacy. The movement toward health solutions begins with creating expectations for improvement and a demand for basic, humane, and effective care. Helping people recognize and articulate that demand is to support the basic human right for health, both physical and mental.

Q ■ Do you believe that media attention to mental health issues will grow or decline in the next five to ten years?

Anso Thom

I believe that media attention to mental health issues will decline. It is such a silent and “under the carpet” issue in the global health space. There are so many competing challenges, and I believe that, because it is a tough area to report on, journalists will prefer to find issues that are slightly easier to report on. However, this does not mean that I think mental health is unimportant. I believe, more than anything, that it is one of the most critical challenges facing our world today, and it is a challenge that is shared by the developing and developed worlds alike.

Edward Campion

Throughout the world, in both developed and developing countries, the public’s interest in medicine and health has been growing. Understanding health and disease is seen as an essential life skill and a core part of understanding the world about and within us. Improvements in information delivery and electronic communication are opportunities to build attention to the importance of mental health as an essential medical need in all human societies.

Claire Bithell

I am optimistic that coverage of mental health problems will increase. At the Science Media Centre, we have already seen how giving journalists access to the best experts and information can make a difference. Last year we were lucky enough to have a press briefing

with Thomas Insel, director of the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health. In the press briefing, he put forward a strong case for why mental health problems are among the biggest challenges we face as a society, and why this is such an exciting time for mental health research. We have also launched big studies and cutting-edge research, such as a report on the on prevalence and burden of mental health disorders authored by the European College of Neuropsychopharmacology. Since running these press briefings, a number of journalists have commented to me that they have had discussions with their editors about publishing more mental health stories. In my experience, specialist correspondents hold sway within media outlets and can make the case to increase coverage, but they need eloquent spokespeople and robust figures and research to achieve this goal.

Mohuya Chaudhuri

For a long time, it was believed that mental health problems did not occur in India, and if they did, they were rare cases. Traditional treatments were used, even for conditions like epilepsy. But as the number of afflicted grows, there is gathering awareness that mental illness will be one of the greatest health challenges for India. In the next decade, there will be increasing demand for stories related to mental health, and media attention will increase accordingly. However, for this to take place, the media must be highly engaged on the issue. ∞

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