

Discriminating Times?

A re-survey of New Zealand print media reporting on mental health

Mental Health COMMISSION

June 2005

Hospital casualty
was mental patient

Darkest days like
a big black hole

The patient who died suddenly at
Wanganui Hospital on July 16 was
under the care of its Mental Health
Department.

relating to the patient and
patient's treatment and care
this extended to the circum-
stances surrounding the sudden death
which had been reported.

ANNE remembers her
darkest days as like be-
ing in "a big black hole
without being there."

The next battle for ANNE was
accepting she had to take med-
ication, despite her
reluctance.

Foreword

There is a certain inevitability about some aspects of the way that mental health stories are and are likely to remain reported.

That is: mental illness makes the front page not as a health story, but as a crime story, reported most often by court, police and general reporters.

So, while this study shows that the vast majority of print media reports relating to mental health are "neutral" in content, those coded "negative" are the ones that create the biggest headlines and the most public and political response. These, too, are the stories that cause the most anguish for people living with a mental illness, whose daily reality is not dissimilar from anyone else's, but who have a greater tendency to be poor, subjected to discrimination, and to be the victim of violence – both self-inflicted and at the hands of others.

However, this tendency for crisis to make the news is hardly confined to the field of mental health. The adage "if it bleeds, it leads" is as true today as it ever was, and advocates in every sector complain of sensational and shallow reporting.

What makes mental health reportage so comparatively sensitive is its potential for direct, negative impact on the lives of individuals.

There is some welcome evidence in this survey that attitudes among journalists are changing. Many reporters are beginning to recognise that hostile or unconsidered reporting on mental health issues is as damaging and unbalanced as, say, openly racist or sexist reporting.

The inclusion of mental health components in journalism courses is critical in this regard. Most young reporters enter the industry with a sense of vocation and idealism. This is the best time to arm them with basic factual knowledge about mental illnesses, treatments, mental health law, and the complexity of the links between human drama and mental state.

However, change at this expert level is one thing. Changing prevailing public mindsets is another. The increase noted here in letters to the editor from people expressing negative views about mental health issues is a warning. Like attitudes on race and gender issues, the disappearance of "unacceptable" views from public discourse may simply mean that they persist underground.

In that regard, perhaps the most important new influence discussed in this survey is the growing confidence of the users and providers of mental health services. Previously hidden, these mental health advocates are finding their voices – becoming visible and available participants in the public discourse around mental health issues in a way that has, until recently, been all too rare.

To entrench new understandings of mental health and illness, this trend must continue.

Patrick Smellie

Patrick Smellie is a former journalist, now working in corporate communications. In 1997-98, he was awarded a Harkness Fellowship to examine media portrayals of serious mental illness, based at the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, in Washington DC.

Paroled criminals
living in backpacker
hostels 'nothing new'

Happy pills
linked to
suicides

Acknowledgements

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Most of the mentally ill are neither socially undesirable nor dangerous, as is frequently portrayed. More

Bid to beat depression

Depression in young people will be the subject of workshops

Club has raised funds for the workshops, which have national Rotary support. The

Function Centre. Thirty people from health, welfare, disability, education and

wrote the book "Te Kete Whaiora," which was put out by the Mental Health Foundation and which will be used as a

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Dead man was no 'nutcase', Mental health toll on refugees rises

1. Introduction

Discrimination is one of the most important factors affecting a person's ability to recover from mental illness¹. Discrimination has individuals evicted from their homes, fired from their jobs, distanced and treated with shame by their friends and families, and ostracised from their communities².

One of the key roles of the Mental Health Commission is to reduce discrimination and prejudice against people with mental illness. As part of this work, we have sometimes focused on the role of the media in relation to discrimination. In August 2000, the Mental Health Commission published *The Discrimination Times: A report on an investigation into news media (re) presentation of people with mental illness*.³ That publication arose from a systematic survey of newspaper clippings published in 1997 and 1998 and aimed "to analyse and describe how the newsprint media (re) presents people with mental illness to their readers, to identify blind spots and shining lights" and "to identify ways to improve the presentation of people with mental illness".

The Discrimination Times showed that few clippings referring to mental health were positive in their subject matter, treatment or headlines, and that newspapers with larger readerships were the most negative in their representation of people with mental illness. Violence was

mentioned in about one in five clippings, thereby reinforcing its popular association with mental illness. The views of mental health service users were rarely sought, with less than 10% of clippings containing quotations from them. When service users were quoted, the presentation was usually more positive.

Other New Zealand research has investigated the major role that the media plays in shaping community attitudes towards people with experience of mental illness and in contributing to discrimination. Allen and Nairn point to an "overwhelming negativity of depictions of the mentally ill" in television and print media.⁴ Another paper from the same research group argues that "readers use the same kind of commonsense understandings of mental illness to interpret media stories that are used by media to construct stories."⁵ This means that the media draws on, as well as influences, everyday beliefs about mental illness, and that even non-sensationalised stories can, if not carefully presented, lead to interpretations that reaffirm everyday beliefs.

The aim of the present study is to report on any changes that have occurred since *The Discrimination Times*. Several major initiatives have been at work throughout this period, focusing on reducing discrimination in media reporting, and in the discussion section of this report we describe some of these and discuss the findings of the study in relation to these efforts.

¹ Lapsley et al (2002) *Kia Mauri Tau! Narratives of Recovery from Disabling Mental Health Problems* Mental Health Commission, Wellington New Zealand.

² Peterson, D et al (2004) *Respect costs nothing: Mental Health Discrimination in New Zealand* Mental Health Foundation, Wellington, New Zealand.

³ Mental Health Commission (2000) *The Discrimination Times: A report on an investigation into news media (re)presentation of people with mental illness* Wellington, New Zealand.

⁴ Allen, R & Nairn, RG (1997) *Media depictions of mental illness: An analysis of the use of dangerousness*. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry 31:375.

⁵ Wilson, C et al (1999) *Mental illness depictions in prime-time drama: Identifying the discursive resources*. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry 33:232.

Mental health goes to the mall

Forget lying back on the couch and telling a bearded academic your problems for three years. Our consumer society is

Psych unit staff need support

For many years I have been spending time with patients and staff in the psychiatric unit in Hastings in my role as hospital chaplain. The staff have my utmost respect for the job they are doing. They receive little recognition of the hospital.

Others come back very regularly. I am aware that we always hear the negative things about the unit, not the good things.

Staff on the extra mile often without a full lunch hour or they say back because of their dedication to the task. The violence and abuse they experience is not as part of their job. It is easy to visit in the

2. Key Findings

Compared with *The Discrimination Times*, this survey found that there was a significant improvement in the way people with experience of mental illness were represented by the print media.

- **A large drop in the number of clippings with a mental health theme:** There was a 62% decrease in the number of articles which had a mental health theme compared with the first study, even taking the shorter time period of the second study into account. The fact that there were fewer clippings overall is most likely related to our finding of proportionally fewer negative clippings, with less focus on crime and violence.
- **Fewer clippings portraying mental health negatively and more with a positive approach:** Proportionally, there was a consistent decrease in negative reporting, and an increase in positive reporting. There were less discriminatory headlines, mental health was dealt with more fairly, more accurate information was provided, service user comments were included more often, and more sensitive language was used. There were more praiseworthy articles and few protest-worthy ones.
- **A notable increase in the number of positive personal stories:** The proportion of positive personal stories carried by the media increased from 5.7% to 11.1%, despite the inclusion of the period of Mental Health Awareness Week in the first study, which tends to lend itself to the publication of positive personal stories.

- **Improved reporting on crime and violence:** There was a slight drop in the proportion of stories associating crime or violence with mental illness, but the way this material was presented improved considerably.
- **Major daily newspapers showed improvements, while weekly and smaller newspapers showed more negative reporting:** Major daily newspapers such as *The Dominion Post*, *The New Zealand Herald* or *The Press* represented people with experience of mental illness more positively than they had in the previous study, while smaller weekly and metropolitan newspapers did less well than previously.

In interpreting these findings it is important to note that there are ebbs and flows in the media in relation to particular topics, and that even one major event and its consequences can have an impact on clippings over a survey period. For this reason, it is best that these results be read in the context of the ever-changing world of media reporting.

Feeling sad? It doesn't mean you're sick
MENTAL HEALTH: John Read says giving people medical-sounding labels and prescribing drugs is no basis for effective care

Happy pills linked to suicides

3. Research Methods

3.1 The 1997/98 and 2004 surveys

The *Discrimination Times* involved a three-month review of all print media clippings on mental health collected by Chongs Clipping Service, from 1 – 15 September, October and November during 1997 and 1998. This yielded 805 articles. All articles were classified into four categories – columnists (regular writers), features, letters and news and were then scored according to the process outlined below.

This study is a comparative one, using the same method of the previous study, although on a smaller scale. Clippings from Chongs were collected from 1 to 15 January, February and March 2004, and yielded 153 clippings from 51 newspapers and magazines around New Zealand.

There were several reasons for the smaller number of clippings available for this survey. First, the survey covered one, rather than two three-month periods. Second, there were fewer repeat articles in the sample (in the first survey 25% of articles were repeats of, for example, news stories sourced from NZPA, compared with 13% in the second survey). It is possible that a few repeat stories from the clipping service were not kept and therefore were not available to be included in our sample.

Third, the first survey included Mental Health Awareness Week in both years. Mental Health Awareness Week is a major international event and it resulted in 86 clippings (nearly 11% of the total) in the earlier survey. Another reason for fewer articles dealing with mental health in the current survey was that our sampling period, from January to March, included the holiday period, which may have meant a period of lower media activity overall.

In making overall comparisons between the two surveys (see Figure 1 and accompanying text below), we decided that these would be more meaningful if we excluded Mental Health Awareness Week clippings. All other comparisons reported in this paper contain data including Mental Health Awareness Week clippings. We made no adjustment for the smaller number of repeat items (in the previous study repeat items had more negative ratings).

3.2 Scoring procedures

All the clippings were rated either positive (+1), neutral (0) or negative (-1) in three different areas: subject matter, treatment and headline. The key question asked in relation to each article was 'How does the subject matter, treatment or headline potentially affect the reader's perception of people with mental illness?'

Subject Matter refers to the topic or content of the clipping. For example, an article about service users as useful members of their community or relaying a personal story of recovery, would receive a score of +1, and an article associating crime and mental illness would receive a score of -1.

Treatment included the presentation of the material, for example, choice of a photo and/or any emphasis in the text. In determining the score for treatment, questions such as those below were asked:

- How did the writer present people with a mental illness?
- Was the language appropriate?
- Did the reader get a balanced view of the issues?

Health crisis team call after woman found 'dodging cars'

Invercargill
Police have called for a full-time mental health
Queenstown after a woman
the police found

Study says anti-depressants work for children

Prozac best for youth

New York: Anti-depressants are
the best way to treat children
with depression, according to a
United States government study
released yesterday.

The drug Prozac was found to
be more effective in helping

About 439 adolescents aged
between 12 and 17 were
involved in the study. All were
suffering from moderate to
severe depression.

For 26 weeks they were given

- Is the selection of material (eg, who is quoted) fair?

For example, an article that used discriminatory language or presented only one clearly negative viewpoint without seeking alternative views would receive a score of -1. eg, "The insane and mad are being let loose to live in your community."

Headline score was determined after considering the following question, 'How would just the headline alone effect the reader's view of people with a mental illness?' For example an article whose headline appeared to have little effect on people's perceptions of people with mental illness received a score of '0', eg, 'New programme for hospital'.

The articles were originally rated by the project's researcher after a briefing from Mental Health Commission staff and the lead researcher from the previous study. The scores of 30 articles were also subjected to a peer review with three people with experience in the field of the representation of people with mental illnesses.

In addition, clippings in both studies were also assessed for their potential as protest-worthy or praiseworthy. Protest-worthy clippings were those that merited a vigorous complaint for misleading, discriminatory, and prejudicial journalism. Conversely, praiseworthy clippings were those that merited a 'congratulations on publishing' letter to the editor.



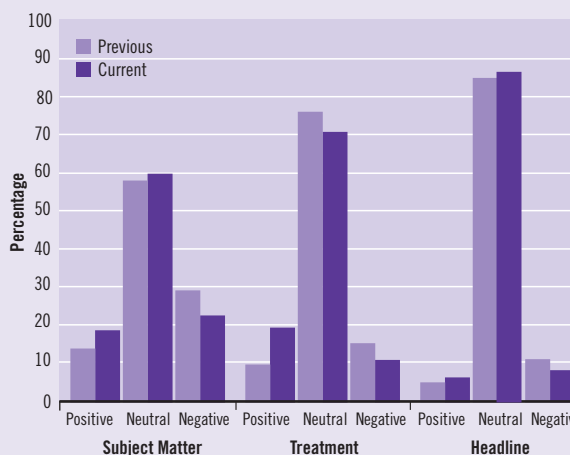
4. Detailed Findings

4.1 Overall results

The study shows an improvement in the way people with experience of mental illness are represented by the print media. Looking at the best and the worst of the clippings, around one in 20 in the current study were praiseworthy and one in 50 protest-worthy, whereas the proportions were reversed in the previous study.

Our analysis of items showed improvements in subject matter, treatment and headline (for an explanation of these terms and scoring procedures, see the section on pages six and seven on research methods). Positive scores went up for each category and negative scores went down. The subject matter of mental health clippings was more likely to be positive (18.3% in the current study compared to 13.5% in the previous one), and headlines were less likely to be negative (7.8% in the current study compared to 10.7% in the previous one). Improvements in treatment (ie, how the material was presented) were the most considerable, with 19% receiving a positive score compared to 9.3% in the previous one. Statistical analysis showed that improvements in the treatment of mental health items were unlikely to have been due to chance variation between surveys.⁶

Figure 1.
Comparing Scores for Subject Matter, Treatment and Headline Across the Two Studies (Mental Health Awareness Week clippings excluded)



Had Mental Health Awareness week clippings been included in this comparison, the differences between the two surveys would not have been as marked in terms of positive ratings of clippings, because positive stories are the hallmark of that media event. However, including the week does not make any marked difference to the comparisons around negative stories, which were fewer in the recent survey. Also, the scores for treatment still show a notable improvement in this survey, whether or not Mental Health Awareness week was included.

4.2 Mental health coverage by different newspapers

Chongs provided clippings from 20 metropolitan newspapers and, during the time period studied, these newspapers averaged three clippings each with a mental health theme. The newspapers responsible for the most clippings were also those with the largest circulation. These were the New Zealand Herald, the Dominion Post and The

⁶ Statistical analysis was carried out on the overall results (excluding Mental Health Awareness week articles) in order to establish whether the improvements shown by the current study were statistically significant. A chi-squared analysis showed that Treatment had improved significantly ($p < 0.01$), whereas the improvements in Subject Matter and Headline were slighter and fell below the threshold of statistical significance. This means that these improvements may have been due to chance fluctuations, although most likely explanation is that they represent genuine improvements between the two periods.



Press,⁷ (18, 12 and 19 clippings respectively). The Otago Daily Times and the Waikato Times also had higher than average numbers of mental health stories, with 11 and 10 clippings respectively.

4.3 The 10 major newspapers

The 10 largest newspapers in terms of circulation were separated out for comparison with the rest (smaller newspapers and magazines), because they are the most widely read and therefore have the most impact on perceptions of mental illness.⁸ In the previous survey major newspapers had more negative clippings than the rest across each of the three dimensions that were rated. In this survey the major newspapers showed an improvement in terms of their representation of people with experience of mental illness, with a drop in negative scores, an increase in neutral scores and to a lesser extent, an increase in positive scores. However, their clippings were still rated more negatively overall than the magazines and smaller newspapers.

Some newspapers made greater improvements than others in their treatment of mental health issues, notably the Otago Daily Times and The Press. Three newspapers failed to achieve any positive scores on clippings included in the survey, and the Sunday Star Times had the highest negative score of all the newspapers.

4.4 Violence

There was a small improvement in references to violence in stories about mental health. In the earlier study (excluding Mental Health Awareness Week), 22% of clippings had references to violence and 19% of these were deemed protest-worthy. In the 2004 study, the proportion of clippings with reference to violence reduced to 15%. None of these were deemed protest-worthy, which is a

huge improvement. Major newspapers are still 6% more likely than small newspapers to include references to violence within their clippings, and this figure remained constant throughout both studies.

4.5 Crime

Overall, 20% of clippings were assigned the code of crime, crime event and /or court case compared with 18% previously, indicating little change along that dimension. However, Table 1 shows a marked decrease in negative scores for this section (the nature of the scoring system means that articles linking crime and mental illness can only attain either a neutral or a negative score).

Table 1.
A comparison of negative scores from clippings dealing with crime.

	Subject matter	Treatment	Headline
1997/98	91%	38%	27%
2004	61%	26%	6%

4.6 Using sources

Quotes used within a clipping can give a range of perspectives on a topic, and quotes from mental health consumers are likely to portray mental illness in a more favourable way. Overall, 101 (66%) clippings contained quotes compared with 78% in the previous study, a decrease of 15%. However, the number of mental health consumers and family members quoted almost doubled, while the proportion of politicians quoted showed a marked decrease.

⁷ Circulation rates: NZ Herald 230,000; Dominion Post 100,000; The Press 91,000

⁸ The Evening Post and the Dominion have merged since the last study and Hawkes Bay Today has been added to the top 10.

**Wanted:
Employer
to see past
disability**

Forget lying back on the couch
and telling a bearded academic
your problems for three years.
Our consumer society is
increasingly treating good mental
health as just another commodity
to buy off the shelf. But do any of
them care?

**Darkest days like
a big black hole**

ANNE remembers her
darkest days as those be-
ing in "a big black hole"
without being able to climb up
the stairs!

The next battle for Anne was
accepting she had to take medi-
cation, despite the stigma she
perceived in the treatment.
(But she came to terms with
it.)

4.7 Clipping types

Clippings were put into four categories – columnists (regular writers), features, letters to the editor and news. Letters to the editor were the most negative for subject matter and treatment, with columnists the next most negative. Features had the most positive treatment and headline ratings and negative treatment scores decreased for this type of clipping. News stories (and NZPA clippings) were less likely to attract positive or negative scores than the other categories, with more of them being rated as neutral.

Feature articles increased proportionally in this survey and improvements in the way they treated mental health is a positive development, too. Only letters to the editor went against the trend with negative Treatment scores rising.

4.8 Examples of articles

Example 1. Positive headline, positive subject matter and positive treatment.

The Saturday Express, distributed throughout Blenheim, printed an article entitled "hearing voices", which told the story of a local 19 year old, who had been hearing voices since she was 13 years old. The article gave an excellent story, based on facts, had lots of quotes from the person and a mental health promoter. It talked about her struggles as well as her recovery and generally gave a clear picture of the reality of mental illness as well as recovery.

Example 2. Negative headline, neutral subject matter and neutral treatment.

In contrast, the Dominion Post printed a report of a coroner's hearing entitled, "Nurse shortage linked to mental patient's death". While the article clearly reported the findings of the hearing, the use of the term "mental patient" in the title was disappointing and unnecessary.

Example 3. Negative headline, negative subject matter and neutral treatment

In March, The Daily News in New Plymouth printed an article entitled, "Concerns raised on mental-health home", which highlighted residents concerns about a residential home to be set up in New Plymouth. Questions were raised about the necessity of printing the article which included stereotypical analogies such as "residents wanted reassurance from the trust that its clients would not pose a threat, especially to children who regularly walked the surrounding streets". However attempts had been made to give a balanced view, it had quotes that supported both sides of the 'argument' and appeared to fairly represent the views of all.

4.9 Limitations of the study

Compared with the 1997/98 study, this one examined fewer clippings, for a number of reasons (shorter sample period, inclusion of January holiday season, fewer repeat clippings (repeat clippings score more negatively), and Mental Health Awareness Week not occurring in the sample period). All these factors undoubtedly made some impact on the findings, although we did exclude Mental Health Awareness Week clippings from the first survey in presenting overall comparisons.

Surveys such as this are also vulnerable to the occurrence of high profile events linked with mental illness which can distort representations throughout a survey period. During the current survey period there were no such high profile events, though in the previous survey there was certain amount of coverage of a mental health inquiry, which generated negative stories.

However, the consistency of the improvements since the previous survey, with its decrease in negative representations as well as increase in positive representations, leads us to believe that the changes recorded genuinely reflect changes in media reporting of mental illness. In particular, the improvement in treatment of the mental illness issues, and the switch in ratios of praiseworthy and protest-worthy items, supports this interpretation.

Paroled criminals
living in backpacker
hostels 'nothing new'

by Sarah Curtis

Dead man was
no 'nutcase'

like sexual crimes or assault.
City Villa manager Catherine Coon
said when she took over her busi-
ness she called Ashworth Bear
the previous

5. Discussion

Overall results show a moderate improvement in the way people with mental illness are portrayed by the print media. The work done over the last few years to educate print media about representing people with mental illnesses more positively does appear to have made some impact, particularly with the major newspapers.

The *Like Minds Like Mine* campaign, coming out of the Ministry of Health, has been the major New Zealand initiative aimed at improving public attitudes and reducing stigma and discrimination towards people with experience of mental illness. Results from surveys indicate that the campaign has been very effective in stimulating positive changes in attitudes.⁹

A major strategy within the campaign has been to work with media in their reporting of mental health and specific measures have included training programmes run by Huia Communications at journalism schools, fellowships for two New Zealand journalists each year for the last four years to the Carter Centre in the USA, and the publication and nationwide distribution to newspapers of *Media Handbook: a resource for journalists and sub-editors reporting on mental illness* four years ago. The *Media Handbook* gives advice on such things as the use of appropriate language, the avoidance of reinforcing myths and stereotypes, the use of appropriate headlines as well as the interviewing of mental health consumers.

Within the *Like Minds, Like Mine* campaign, 26 provider organisations operate at a local level. These organisations consist of a range of different groups including consumer, Māori and Pacific groups. They undertake media initiatives such as making complaints to the news media around

unduly negative reporting, utilising media services to deliver positive messages about mental illness and training people with experience of mental illness to speak to the media.

Various agencies, including the Mental Health Commission, the Mental Health Foundation and the *Like Minds, Like Mine* campaign have also undertaken a range of activities focused on raising awareness of mental health issues, and the effect that negative reporting has on people with experience of mental illness. All agencies have proactively targeted media with letters to the editor, and regular calls to brief media. On occasion when monitoring reveals reporting that is discriminatory then these agencies often contact the media to discuss this.

Workshops held around the country by Commission staff following the publication of *The Discrimination Times* highlighted the negative impact of such articles and promoted less negative and stereotypical ways of reporting. In addition the Mental Health Commission has produced a series of three fact sheets on mental illness and violence, which dispute the myth that people with mental illness are particularly prone to violence. A media briefing was held in March 2003 and issues around discrimination and stigma were discussed, along with information on the Commission's work programme and the importance of having a service user perspective in stories. To ensure that consumer views are available for the media to report on mental health issues, the Commission, in association with the Mental Health Foundation and *Like Minds Like Mine* has implemented a programme to train and use service user media spokespeople. When the Mental Health Commission receives media enquiries, every effort is made to refer media to one of these spokespeople for a service user perspective. Media have become increasingly responsive to this approach.

⁹ Phoenix Research (2003) Impact of National Media Campaign Survey 4, Auckland, New Zealand.

Happy pills linked to suicides

Karen Harvey
New Zealand Herald — 1997
Depression in young people will be the subject of workshops in Wanganui in June

Bid to beat depression

Club has raised funds for the workshops, which have national Rotary support. The workshops are being

Function Centre. Thirty people from health, welfare, disability, education and community sectors will receive training each

wrote the book "Te Kete Whaiora," which was put out by the Mental Health Foundation and which will be used as a resource at the workshops. Manny Down,

In conclusion, this survey suggests that the work carried out by various agencies and organisations aiming to improve reporting of mental health issues is bearing fruit. Given the potent role of the media in shaping public attitudes to people with experience of mental illness, this is an

encouraging development, and we would like to applaud those newspapers, and their journalists and editorial staff, who have contributed to the changes that we have noted. It is important that the survey be repeated from time to time so that we can be sure that this positive trend continues.

