

Psychiatrists' professional opinions to the press

In March 1992, Council approved guidelines produced by the Special Committee on Unethical Psychiatric Practices, 'Psychiatrists' professional opinions to the press'. These were published in the *Psychiatric Bulletin* in July 1992 (16, 458).

However, since that time, I have been concerned to learn of a number of instances in which members or fellows of the College have made statements in the press which are not in keeping with these guidelines.

I should therefore like to ensure that members and fellows of the College are familiar with these guidelines (reprinted below). Attention is drawn to the statement that "*it is unethical for a psychiatrist to offer a professional opinion unless he/she has conducted an examination and has been granted proper authorisation for such a statement*".

Dr F. CALDICOTT, *President, The Royal College of Psychiatrists*

"The College encourages psychiatrists to provide the press with expert and up-to-date information. The Public Education Department has a list of experts to deal with press enquiries.

"Certain precautions need to be taken, especially when there is great pressure by the media for psychiatric opinions about individuals whose behaviour – often criminal or violent – has caused public concern. In these situations, it is essential that psychiatrists

should (i) understand that they are absolutely entitled to make no comment; (ii) confine themselves to general statements about the behaviour under discussion and avoid instant opinions about individuals. Psychiatrists should be particularly careful when the reporter is not known to them, or works for a tabloid known for sensational reporting – where the "reporting" is often the sub-editing of the reporter's original material.

"The American Psychiatric Association has issued ethical guidelines on this matter, as follows:

On occasion psychiatrists are asked for an opinion about an individual who is in the light of public attention, or who has disclosed information about himself through public media. It is unethical for a psychiatrist to offer a professional opinion unless he/she has conducted an examination and has been granted proper authorisation for such a statement.

"The College agrees with this principle. Speculations about persons whom a psychiatrist has never met could be damaging, both to the professional and to the profession as a whole.

"The Public Education Department is always willing to advise psychiatrists in their dealings with the media".

Special Committee on Unethical Psychiatric Practices. Approved by Council, 18 March 1992

Criteria for Fellowship nominations

Candidates for the College Fellowship should be subscribing Members of the College at the time when nominations are submitted. Sponsors will be notified if this is not the case. Nominations must be supported by two sponsors, both of whom must be subscribing Fellows of the College. Their sponsors should not be members of the Court of Electors at the time of submitting their nomination.

Fellowships are normally awarded to Members for distinction in teaching, research, clinical and/or administrative ability, or for exceptional service to patients, especially where supportive staffing is inadequate. Contributions made by

the candidate to the activities of the College will also be taken into account.

If the candidate is practising overseas, a minimum of one of his or her sponsors should be a Fellow working in the same country.

It is unlikely that an individual with less than ten years standing as a Member will be eligible for election to Fellowship.

Procedures for election to the Fellowship are currently being reviewed. Any suggestions or comments on current practice would be gratefully received.

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