

Stigma 1, Psychiatrists 0

Geoffrey Searle

I think I can honestly say that I am a seasoned complainer, although I am careful not to attempt to be Mary Whitehouse and I do not assiduously scan the media looking for trouble. My interest in the area of stigmatization started with an episode of the TV drama *Boon*, where they suddenly had a character become 'mentally ill' so that he could conveniently shoot the hero to achieve a cliff-hanging end-of-series episode. Subsequently I specialised in the portrayal of mental illness in dramatic productions, joined the Public Education Campaign divisional network and had some media training. I have been listed as an expert in the portrayal of mental illness for five years but have never been approached for my advice on this area. However, following this year's announcement of the new Royal College of Psychiatrists' campaign 'Changing Minds: Every Family in the Land', I obtained all the names and addresses in Deborah Hart and Jill Phillipson's article above and stood ready to 'do my bit' for truth and honesty.

23 October 1998

My wife told me when I came in from work that a psychiatric story was breaking, so I caught the snippets of the Health Authority press conference shown on BBC 1 in which they clearly stated that Michael Stone was not 'mad' nor 'schizophrenic'. The immediate media response was bemused but well informed. Out of curiosity I checked the coverage in the newspapers the next day and found that the *Daily Mirror* alone had ignored the press conference and repeatedly stated that Michael Stone was a violent 'schizophrenic'. So I wrote to the editor on 26 October and faxed it off, complaining that they were portraying the situation inaccurately and stigmatising my patients, and asking for a retraction. Nothing happened.

Two and a half weeks later I wrote again, with a copy of the first letter, warning the editor that I would involve the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) if I had not had a reply. Nothing happened.

So seven days later I wrote to the PCC complaining of the inaccuracy and the lack of response.

A week later the reporter from the *Daily Mirror* phoned me, 28 days after my original complaint. He was assured in his opinion of Mr Stone because in his interviews with the family and friends they had told him that Mr Stone was 'schizophrenic' (the article stated the diagnosis as fact, not opinion). He was aware that the press conference held by the Health Authority had expressed a different view but was clearly comfortable with publishing a lay opinion despite a conflicting expert one. Although polite, my concern about stigma being strengthened by any inaccuracy did not seem to perturb him. We agreed to differ and I wrote to the PCC outlining my discussion with the journalist, reiterating that I was not satisfied with his responses.

Then the PCC replied, telling me that I am apparently not directly involved with the case so I cannot complain. Great news I thought, ironically. So I wrote out of curiosity to enquire who could complain. I was told that I need to be involved directly with events (a family member or a representative of the Health Authority) or to suffer from schizophrenia.

This experience almost nullifies the advice given by the Public Education Committee and shows how difficult the campaign will be. Clearly we will be most effective if we ally with our patients, but I am painfully aware of how small a ripple is needed to cause concern, even without the PCC. I was probably the only person to object to the *Daily Mirror* article. Complaints about *Eastenders* using stigmatising stereotypes of the Irish were front page news: the BBC received about 50 phone calls. All we need then is 49 voices raised together.

G. F. Searle, *Consultant Psychiatrist and Public Education Spokesman, King's Park Community Hospital, Gloucester Road, Boscombe, Bournemouth BH7 6JE*