

Psychiatrists' professional opinions to the press

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.

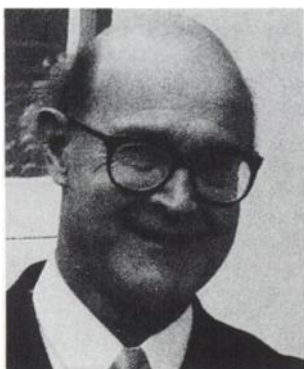
The Public Education Department is always willing to advise psychiatrists in their dealings with the media.

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

Obituary

Editor: Henry R. Rollin

JOHN ATHERTON CAMERON, formerly Consultant Psychiatrist, Royal Navy



John Cameron was born in 1929 in Shanghai, where his father was a general practitioner. The family returned to the UK when John was aged 9 and he continued his education at the Dragon School, Oxford, and then at Sherborne. After National Service in the Royal Artillery he went up to Edinburgh to read medicine and qualified MB ChB in 1956 and became MRCP (UK) in 1970. He

worked in general practice and industrial medicine before entering the Royal Navy in 1962. He advanced quickly, and from 1975 was the Medical Director-General (Naval)’s Adviser in Psychiatry. In 1978 he gained promotion to Surgeon Captain. He was a foundation member of the College in 1971, was elected to the fellowship in 1981 and in the same year was elected FRCP (Edin).

In 1980, just before he retired from the Service he took time off to go to sea at the invitation of the Flag Officer, in HMS Antrim, a missile destroyer. It was the first Royal Naval visit to Shanghai since the ‘Amethyst’ incident in 1949. There, the authorities dug out some old street maps for him and he found that his birth place had become a nail factory!

Cameron was a doctor first and a psychiatrist second. Thus, after his retirement from the Royal Navy, he was appointed a medical officer to Dartmoor prison where he worked for five years. In Dartmoor he was horrified at the plight of some of the prisoners