

Psychiatry and the media

Psychiatrists and the public*

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One hundred and fifty years on, how, Professor Clare asked an invited audience of eminent non-psychiatrists at the Royal Society of Medicine, do we fare? Is there really a more positive attitude to mental illness, now than in the nineteenth century, or even the 1960s? The Victorian public image of madness was characterised by ignorance, intolerance and fear and the mentally ill regarded as less than human, available to be exploited or used to entertain; and also, dangerous and incurable, best put away in large mental hospitals or 'bins'. The media colluded in maintaining such attitudes: a leader in *The Times* in 1900, commenting on the 30-fold increase in the mental hospital population, was anxious that soon the mad might outnumber the sane!

What has been the media's role in helping inform the public of more recent changes in psychiatric practice? The media can certainly focus attention on the problems of mental health care, but Professor Clare suggested, this has not always been done in a helpful way. He gave as examples the perpetuation of the notion that mentally ill people are violent, or that schizophrenia is the 'split mind' disease (consider, for example, a headline about rugby union: 'schizophrenia sets in as game faces dreadful quandary'). Performers such as Spike Milligan or John Ogden can, without fear, reveal their psychiatric histories, but such tormented, gifted and creative people are seen in a different light from the rest of the population. Unlike other disorders where patients have talked freely, demystifying their illnesses and treatment, discussion of issues related to mental illness has largely been left to the professionals and more recently, carers and relatives rather than the sufferers themselves.

However, not only have psychiatrists been purveyors of grim and gristly treatments in large mental

hospitals, but, since the time of Freud, they have also been seen as mind readers able to excavate the psyche like archaeologists or work like detectives. The psychoanalyst has been transformed into a kind of guru, the inheritor of the religious tradition within medicine. The latest image of psychiatrists, in line with recent advances in our understanding of the biological basis of mental health disorders, is that of a brain scientist. Visual images, such as CT and other scans have helped to remove the aura of mystery and fear.

The multifaceted picture of a psychiatrist that has emerged offers an intriguing image for the public. Different aspects of this composite person have been used in the cinema, with figures such as Drs Dippy, Wonderful and Evil appearing. (Female psychiatrists rarely feature on the screen.) Notions of causation that film makers employ are simplistic, generally assuming that there is a single cause which is buried awaiting detection by the Sherlock Holmes or interpretation by the Sigmund Freud doctor; knowledge of this cause is assumed to be the cure. Television producers, however, have started to adopt a more sophisticated approach, in some cases, taking advice from practising clinicians, to make stories as real as possible; there is evidence of some shifts in belief following better informed programmes indicating that public education can take place through the media.

Professor Clare ended by paying tribute to Marjorie Wallace, a 'good' journalist who got her story about the current status of work on schizophrenia from leading researchers in the field, and wrote a factual and unemotional account of it. Subsequently, SANE – Schizophrenia A National Emergency – was founded and since then, a major fund raising appeal to support a national helpline and endow the first chair in schizophrenia research has been launched.

The public image of the psychiatrist is complex, but with the help of the media, public awareness and attitudes towards mental illness are changing.

**'The public image of psychiatry: is it changing?' The Royal College of Psychiatrists' 150th Anniversary Lecture held at The Royal Society of Medicine, London on 19 June 1991.*