

On reporting mental health issues – November 2006

The Commission would like to remind editors to ensure that their staff are aware of the terms of the Mental Health Act 1983 (and its Scottish equivalents: the Mental Health (Care and treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 and the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995, as amended by the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003) and to take care not to describe those who are mentally ill in a way which might raise a potential breach of the Code of Practice, particularly Clause 1 (Accuracy) and Clause 12 (Discrimination).

Terminology is important. People are detained under the Mental Health Act 1983 in "hospitals" and not "prisons", and are "patients" not "prisoners". Under the terms of the Act, the words "jail", "cell" and "cage" are inaccurate when referring to their accommodation.

The four high security hospitals - Ashworth, Rampton, Broadmoor and the State Hospital at Carstairs - provide care and treatment in conditions of security. Their nursing staff serve in a nursing capacity and are not prison officers, although part of their function is to maintain security. Those who have been detained under the Act following conviction for violent offences are in need of treatment and have the same entitlements under the Patient's Charter as other patients in the NHS.

In some circumstances epithets such as, but not limited to, "basket case", "nutter", and "schizo" may raise a breach of Clause 12 of the Code of Practice in discriminating against individuals who are mentally ill - whether detained or not - or a breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy). Not only can such language cause distress to patients and their families, by interfering detrimentally with their care and treatment, it can also create a climate of public fear or rejection.

Journalists and editors who require further information on matters relating to mental illness might like to contact relevant organisations such as Mind, Sane, See Me and Rethink. Contact details are below.

Mind - T: 020 8522 1743 or 07850 788 514 E: press@mind.org.uk
W: www.mind.org.uk A: 15-19 Broadway, London E15 4BQ

Rethink - T: 0845 456 0455 E: media@rethink.org
W: www.rethink.org
A: 5th Floor, Royal London House, 22-25 Finsbury Square, London, EC2A 1DX

Sane - T: 0207 422 5556 E: mediarelations@saneline.org
W: www.sane.org.uk
A: 1st floor, Cityside House, 40 Adler Street, London E1 1EE

See Me - T: 0131 624 8945 E:
W: www.seemescotland.org
A: 9-13 Maritime Street, Edinburgh EH6 6SB

Royal College of Psychiatrists - T:020 7235 2351 E:
W:www.rcpsych.ac.uk

A: National Headquarters, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG

Samaritans - T: 08457 909090 E:

W: www.samaritans.org

A: The Upper Mill, Kingston Road, Ewell, Surrey KT172AF