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Press Complaints Commission

Chairman

Sir Christopher Meyer

From the Chairman

18th August 2005

Dr Evan Harris MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Members of the Commission

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Roger Alton

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Rear Admiral Nick Wilkinson CB

Director

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Dear Dr. Harris,

Thank you for your letter of 17th August.

The most obvious guidance to the press in respect of disabled people is contained in Clause 12 (Discrimination) of the Code, which states: "the press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual's...physical or mental illness or disability" and "details of an individual's...physical or mental illness or disability must be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story".

The use, therefore, of any expression to refer to a person's disability that might be reasonably considered to be prejudicial or pejorative would raise a breach of the Code and be proscribed by the PCC. For that reason, perhaps, the PCC has not found it necessary to produce a general list of terms, relating to disability as a whole, which are to be avoided by the press. I can certainly say that, in my experience, breaches of the Code in this respect are very rare indeed.

However, one area which has caused concern in the past related specifically to mental health. In 1997, as a result, the PCC published a guidance note (enclosed), which did indeed set down expressions to be avoided ("basket case" and "nutter", for example) as well as clarifying appropriate terminology to be used in describing people detained under the Mental Health Act 1983. We are in the process of assessing the impact of this note, but – anecdotally – it appears to have had a considerable effect in improving the reporting of mental health matters.

I do hope this is helpful. Please feel free to contact my office, if we can be of any further assistance.

With kind regards.

*Yours sincerely,
Christopher Meyer*

Sir Christopher Meyer

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