

## **A SUBMISSION TO THE DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT INQUIRY**

I wrote the enclosed essay titled ON THE BROADER SUBJECT OF MENTAL ILLNESS & VIOLENCE (as portrayed in the media) in November 2001 never knowing that it would maintain a durability or an applicability in the face of the ever uncertain footing that makes up varying mental health issues. The basic essay was originally published in the Christmas 2001 edition of the Salvation Jane Newsletter (An excellent publication by and for people with mental health issues).

The point I'm making here is about the unfortunate negative portrayal and the obviously mistaken stereotyping of those with mental health issues in the media. This mistreatment remains, unhappily, one of the few constants in the entire area of mental illness.

And if the media feels a need in the normal state of affairs to report that a paranoid schizophrenic committed a crime (usually overly sensationalized and involving some real or a threat of violence) then they should in all fairness mention the reversed state of being when the criminal is someone not suffering a mental illness. In any case it's both cruel and inaccurate to call a person a schizophrenic. These are first and foremost people who happen to suffer from schizophrenia. Perhaps that's an overly fine a line to draw but the first instance is plainly discriminatory while the second instance is not.

I know there are many differing forms and degrees of disability but I'm concerned here only with those who suffer from a mental health illness and how these people are abused and stereotyped in the media. This subject is and of itself large enough without my trying to include different disabilities and any resultant discrimination that I know little or nothing about.

Where ever there are statistics quoted here they are freely available on the WWW and they are used to reinforce and bring to the attention of the reader the fact that mental illness and aggression or even mental illness and outright violence are not normally related circumstances and that they occupy a completely different time/space each to the other.

If the media should persist in their wrongful depiction of people with mental health issues as violent or aggressive then they are deliberately robbing us of our rightfully comfortable place in the community at large and are essentially separating us from the sometimes accepted position that so many of us have worked so hard for so long to attain.

Those of us suffering with a mental illness are not only in constant danger of being discriminated against, the danger is all too real. Both directly and indirectly we are in fact constantly discriminated against because of the mere presence of an unwelcome and misunderstood personal disability. The histories of any upcoming discriminations are yet to be written. But I hope we can at least learn from the past.

## **ON THE BROADER SUBJECT OF MENTAL ILLNESS & VIOLENCE (As portrayed in the print and electronic media)**

The media thrive on the use of stereotypes. It's what they do and it's their stock in trade. And there is no stereotype more inaccurate and more harmful to the targeted populace than the portrayal of a person with a mental health issue as being inherently dangerous and most usually aggressive or violent into the psychiatric bargain. And after years of strident campaigning by those who matter most, there has been some small and generally encouraging softening of public attitudes towards those with a mental health issue. But it's a task not nearly complete and it still flies in the face of what should be accepted convention.

The use of stereotypes has become so entrenched as to be accepted without question in the general community. If you're told something often enough it's a natural consequence of that telling that you eventually come to believe it. The community can be forgiven for thinking that the stereotype is the norm which is of course, a circumstance that simply should not be permitted to co-exist alongside the obvious and apparent truth of the matter to hand.

The deliberate use of cliches and the invention of catchy stereotypes by the media causes most of the collateral damage done to those working their way through a mental health issue. These artificially imposed cliches are, in and of themselves, desperately dangerous and have no place in this supposedly compassionate community in trying to accurately describe someone with a less than obvious mental health issue within that community.

Recent research, conveniently published on the Internet, has shown that people who are receiving treatment for a mental illness are no more dangerous or prone to outwardly aggressive behaviour than are the rest of the population. In fact, there is a not altogether surprising statistic that suggests people with a mental illness are more likely to harm themselves, or to be harmed, than they are to hurt others. People with Paranoid Schizophrenia for example, are apparently 200 times more likely to harm themselves or commit suicide than they are to harm someone else.

### **THE MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IS GENERALLY MISLEADING**

Again from the internet, a year long analysis of a broad selection of television programs found that a mind boggling 73 per cent of people with a mental health issue were depicted as aggressive and 23 per cent were portrayed (can you believe it??) as homicidal maniacs. When the same study analysed media reports about mental illness in the press, it found that nearly 90 per cent of stories concerning people with such an issue depicted them as aggressive and usually homicidal. This is, of course, a nonsense and such a disagreeable stereotype should never have been allowed to develop let alone flourish.

### **THERE IS AN EXTREMELY TENUOUS ASSOCIATION BETWEEN MENTAL ILLNESS AND VIOLENCE**

There does exist an extremely tenuous association between mental illness and aggression . But this seems to be limited to certain well defined sub-groups such as people with a mental illness who:

- *Are not receiving treatment*
- *Have a history of aggression prior to becoming mentally ill*
- *Abuse alcohol or drugs*

### **PUTTING AGGRESSION AND MENTAL ILLNESS INTO PERSPECTIVE**

As above, there is again an extremely weak association between mental illness and aggression among some people who are not receiving treatment, or who are using illicit drugs, aggression is a greater problem among:

- *People without a mental illness who abuse alcohol or other drugs*
- *Males aged between 15 and 25*

### **SCHIZOPHRENIA AND AGGRESSION**

People with Schizophrenia who are receiving treatment are no more dangerous than anyone in the general population. Although aggression is generally not a real problem so long as the person is receiving that necessary treatment and support, a very small minority of people with Schizophrenia can become aggressive. One reason for such a response could be a very real fear of the symptoms of the Schizophrenia itself Aggression in these people is more often directed inwards and only very rarely to strangers.

### **SELF-HARM OR ABUSE FROM OTHERS IS MORE COMMON**

Another study has found that a sizeable group of Australians with a mental health issue reported at least some abuse within the previous year. It's a fact that:

- *18 per cent had been a victim of unprovoked violence*
- *17 percent attempted suicide or deliberate self harm*
- *15 percent did not feel safe in the area where they were living. (This same statistic highlights the fact that those of us who suffer from a mental illness have the added personal burden of feeling somehow vulnerable and open to harm)*

### **EARLY TREATMENT IS THE KEY TO PREVENTING AGGRESSION**

The most important step in preventing aggression among those with a mental health issue is plainly an improved access to their prescribed medication and proper counselling. It is important that the mental health service professionals quickly identify those most at risk of becoming aggressive and thereby ensure they receive appropriate and timely assistance. That improved community attitudes can for example, put in place a not ideal, but quite workable understanding of the important and telling issue, is also vitally important.

## **HOW FAMILIES CAN COPE WITH AGGRESSION**

If it should somehow happen that a family member or friend does become aggressive, you can:

- *Speak firmly. A very firm "Please stop" can sometimes help the person*
- *Have a plan. If aggressive behaviour is likely, know beforehand who you are going to call. This may be a mental health crisis team, police or a friend*
- *It's important to avoid any confrontation.*
- *Sometimes it's best to leave the person alone until they calm down and become reasonable again*

## **THINGS TO REMEMBER**

- *People with a mental health issue who are receiving appropriate treatment are statistically no more aggressive than anyone else in the wider community*
- *People with Schizophrenia for example, are about 2000 times more likely to harm themselves than others*
- *Prompt and ongoing treatment is the key to reducing aggression among people with a mental health issue*

Irresponsible and damaging comments in the media linking violence with mental illness can cause needless and unnecessary distress to people already suffering from an active mental health issue as well as those placed closest to them such as family and friends who can be led to feel as though they are being unduly blamed and are therefore being found guilty by association.

We urgently need to review the manner in which people with a mental health issue are depicted and portrayed in the media. And only then we might expect to see some small improvement in the applied attitude of the broader community. Those of us with a mental health issue have no real practical defense in this one sided war of words and narrow definitions and as a natural consequence of this we will probably continue to be (deliberately??) misrepresented by the uncaring media at large.

So the DISCRIMINATOR is, in this instance, the PRINT and ELECTRONIC MEDIA. The DISABILITY is MENTAL ILLNESS in all its unpleasant manifestations and the VICTIMS are those so sadly afflicted with such a MENTAL ILLNESS.