

Best practices for challenging inaccurate or unethical reporting on mental health issues

Unfortunately, some journalists in Sri Lanka still report about people with mental health problems either negatively or sensationally. This adds to the prejudice that already exists about people with mental health problems.

Research proves that one of the best ways to combat unethical mental health reporting is to make a formal complaint/protest to the media outlet in question. By hearing that their news item or television/radio show has had a negative impact on someone caring for, or with a mental illness, media outlets have been shown to be much more cautious when dealing with mental health issues the next time around.

There are a number of ways you can conduct this protest effectively.

Correcting inaccuracies

While inaccurate reports or details in news items are almost always as a result of human error, and most times don't fall in the category of being unethical, you can still address mistakes when they occur.

Print (*Newspapers*)

Most journalists strive for accuracy in their reporting, but you may be misquoted at some point. These errors are rarely deliberate. Your concern should be that the meaning of what you said to the reporter was conveyed accurately, not so much whether the exact words were used. If the reporter completely missed the point, let the reporter know (in as helpful a manner as possible).

Where you feel that your views or facts you've given have been seriously misrepresented, you can request that the editor of the newspaper prints a correction.

Television and radio

A common error when being interviewed on television or radio is to allow a reporter's false or inaccurate statements to stand uncorrected. Speak up. If a reporter creates a false premise (assumption) to a question, first correct the assumption and then correct reframe and answer the question.

Example

If a reporter cites information or statistics with which you are not familiar, do not assume they are being reported correctly. Simply state that you are unfamiliar with the information.

After an interview, you may ask the journalist if you can contact him or her with more information you might think of later. Good journalists are interested in all the facts.

‘Letters to the Editor’

Letters to the editor in newspapers and magazines are a good way of correcting inaccuracies, responding to prejudicial portrayals of mental illness or to comment on issues covered by the publication. While only a certain limited number of letters are actually selected for publication, letters to the editor provide a simple way to communicate to a wide audience.

Most publications contain specific guidelines for submitting a letter to the editor, including very limited word-counts. Most publications require letters of less than 200 words. This means that letters must be concise. To increase the chances of publication, letters should comply with the publication guidelines, refer to previous articles or current events, and include contact information.

Tips for Letters to the Editor

- Keep letter tightly composed
- Use specific examples
- One **main** point per letter
- Use accurate, up-to-date information
- Don’t make personal attacks on those opposing your viewpoint
- Always sign your name
- Include contact details (mobile number if you have one)

Please see the attached example that addresses an unethical suicide news item that you could alter to fit your situation.

Example - Letter to the editor

Dear xxxxxx,

We are writing to express our disappointment regarding your report of a child who recently committed suicide.

Not only is the reporting of the story irresponsible, it is also extremely unethical and potentially dangerous for the people in our country dealing with a mental illness. By providing personal details of the victim, including the name and where they lived, you have put the already devastated family in an even worse position.

Your report also details how the child committed suicide - which research shows - will encourage others in a similar situation to do the same thing.

The picture you've used is also very graphic and hurtful to the family.

We encourage you to consider the following statements the next time your news organization is made aware of a suicide.

- Don't make judgments on the cause. Suicide is a complex issue.
- Don't present suicide as an accepted way to solve personal problems.
- Don't reveal the method – it can lead to copycats.
- Do talk to mental health experts
- Do consider reporting on trends rather than individual suicides.
- Do promote help and support for people who might be affected by your story.

The media in all its forms has helped change the way we understand and talk about many issues, such as race, gender and HIV/AIDS. And in Sri Lanka, the media contributed to breaking down the myths and misconceptions about leprosy in the 1990s. We believe the time is now for Sri Lankan media to show that same leadership in regards to mental health issues - like suicide.

A handbook for journalists and editors has recently been published with the help of mental health professionals, journalists and people with mental health problems that provides further guidance and research on mental health reporting in Sri Lanka.

We would be happy to send you copies and speak to your reporters given the opportunity. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact us. We appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

xxxxxx

Contact (the) reporter yourself if you have a relationship

Building relationships with journalists and news editors is extremely important, and can be a big help when an unethical mental health news item appears.

By developing a strong relationship, the chances are far greater of being listened to when you request action.

Contact the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka (online and print media *newspapers* only)

The Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka is an independent body that accepts complaints on editorial content from members of the public and seeks to resolve the dispute through conciliation, mediation or arbitration. There is no fee

involved for this service, and the PCCSL will strive to resolve the matter within 30 working days of receiving a complaint.

The PCCSL only deals with newspapers and online articles. For further details, including the process of making a complaint, visit <http://www.pccsl.lk/>.

Contact the National Institute of Mental Health's media unit

While research shows that a protest is most effective when it comes directly from the individual negatively impacted, it may not always be possible or comfortable to make a complaint as an individual.

To help with those cases, the National Institute of Mental Health's (NIMH) media unit will respond to the media outlet on your behalf.

Simply email all the details of your protest, including a copy of the news item and how it adversely impacted you, to nimhmediaunit@yahoo.com. The media unit will then draft a response and send it out under the signature of NIMH to the media outlet in question as quickly as possible.

Don't just criticize!

The best way to build relationships with your local media is to thank them for positive articles/programs about mental health that they publish or broadcast.

By recognizing their good work, media outlets will be more likely to listen when you present them with a complaint.

Visit the NIMH website for online resources

The information found in this brochure, including the letter to the editor example, can be found on the NIMH website in the media section (visit <http://www.nimh.lk>)

Mental health news articles published in Sri Lanka are also archived on the site for your further information and examples of mental health reporting in the country.