

Unhealthy stereotypes

The Australian, 24 May 2001
Media Section, page 15

Coverage of mental illness is often inaccurate and reinforces prejudices, says Lynette Sheridan Burns

WHEN Neville Garden recently absconded on day leave from a Melbourne psychiatric hospital where he was serving a murder term, the public had a right to know.

But Melbourne's *Herald Sun* did more than warn readers there was a fugitive in their midst. When the news coverage defined Garden's risk to the community in terms of his schizophrenia, it stigmatised hundreds of thousands of Australians who live with serious mental illness.

The sum of the three reports on March 30, splashed over pages one, two and three of the early editions, breaches every one of the federal Department of Health and Aged Care's guidelines on reporting mental illness. These are contained in its Resource Kit for Australian Media Professionals, which is provided free to news organisations.

The *Herald Sun* reports make seven references to Garden's mental illness and only one to his diabetes. The words used by *Herald Sun* reporters to describe Garden include "deranged killer", "mental patient" and "paranoid schizophrenic" (twice).

There were no facts in the stories about whether Garden was experiencing a psychotic episode at the time of his escape. Even a person who is not taking medication for schizophrenia is not delusional all the time. Yet the descriptions suggested that the escapee was inherently volatile and unpredictable, despite evidence from those in contact with him that he was a "thorough gentleman".

"People being treated for schizophrenia are no more likely to be violent than anyone else. In fact, they are more likely to be victims," says Professor Trevor Waring, Director of the Hunter Institute of Mental Health in Newcastle, NSW.

"It's just a myth that there are psychotic killers on the loose. You are far more likely to be killed by someone you sleep with or drink with than by a mentally ill person."

The reporting also makes 10 references to security factors, including the prisoner being "flown back under armed guard" and that "15 members of the armed offenders squad took part in the hunt" (Garden was unarmed and was recaptured while asleep), despite eye-witness reports that Garden was quiet, polite and friendly.

"Just because Neville Garden was no longer in hospital it did not mean he was likely to commit murder," says Waring.

It's ironic that "deranged", one of the words used by the *Herald Sun* to describe Garden means "to disrupt or throw into confusion".

That is exactly what this reporting does, by contributing to existing confusion about the risks posed by the mentally ill and reinforcing stigma against them.

The damage from this kind of reporting affects many more than the 160,000 Australians diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Parents, siblings, spouses, children and extended families of those afflicted are counselled to accept and understand the illness without prejudice and at the same time are warned to keep the diagnosis secret. Why? Because the picture of schizophrenia painted by the media leads members of the public to respond as the woman quoted in the *Herald Sun* did.

Megan Barrow was asked by the reporter if "she was concerned about her safety when she realised she had been working only metres from the deranged killer".

"It is very scary, very scary, that someone like that was so close to me," she replied.

Waring says that despite the evidence, the bulk of the population thinks there is a necessary link between psychiatric illness and violence. "The overall media coverage of mental illness misinforms the public and causes those affected to suffer even more."

"The main impact of the reporting is that it reinforces stigma against people with mental illness and their families. There is a sense that you can't tell people because of a real fear of ignorance and prejudice against the whole family."

The tone of the *Herald Sun*'s reporting may reflect general community beliefs, but it also reinforces ignorance.

"Stigma kills and it kills the victims," says Waring. He is referring to the high rate of suicide by people with schizophrenia — about one in 10 in Australia.

A recently completed federal government research project is the latest to point to the role the media plays in public understanding of mental illness.

Jane Pirkis from the University of Melbourne and Professor Warwick Blood from the University of Canberra reviewed Australian and international research studies about the reporting of suicide.

"Irrespective of whether specific media effects of reporting [on knowledge, attitudes or behaviours] can be demonstrated, various groups — health and medical experts, journalists and editors, lay people and at-risk groups — perceive that the media does have influence," the report concludes.

"The way in which mental illness is reported is important, as are other ethical and social considerations such as privacy versus the right to know."

Another federally funded project is seeking to improve reporting of mental illness by educating journalists. The Response Ability Project, co-ordinated by the Hunter Institute of Mental Health, helps to provide pre-professional education of nurses, secondary school teachers and journalists, key professionals likely to come in contact with people who have a mental illness.

The journalism materials are designed to encourage sensitive reporting that still meets journalistic objectives and serves the public interest.

"The aim is not to stop reporting of mental illness but to make it more accurate and less damaging," says project officer Karen Vincent.

Social stigma can be eradicated. Over time, the media changed the way it reported about children born out of wedlock, who once carried the stigma of illegitimacy for life.

Australia has come a long way since "lunatics" were transported by water, rather than on public highways (for safety reasons), but community stigma and fear remains. The media's coverage of mental health issues can either be part of the problem or part of the solution.

Lynette Sheridan Burns is head of the journalism program at the University of Newcastle and a consultant to the Response Ability Project.

Killer now safe behind bars



Court told patient assaulted girl, 6

A DOUGLASVILLE woman who was assaulted by a 6-year-old girl was told by a judge that the girl was not the child sex offender referred to in the linked story on the left, although a quick glance at the spread might suggest that



Garden stocked for survival in the bush

Search for sex offender Neville Garden under police escort at Extonwood Airport. PHOTOS: CAMERON LESTER/PAUL

Breaches guidelines: The Herald Sun's coverage of the recapture of Neville Garden — Garden was not the child sex offender referred to in the linked story on the left, although a quick glance at the spread might suggest that

1. Ensure the headline(s) makes links that are accurate and confirmed. Consider whether a person's mental illness is so relevant to the story that it deserves a headline focus or if it really adds to it in a significant way.
2. Sensationalism and mental illness is a bad combination. If headlines are inflammatory about mental illness they can reinforce myths and reduce the status of people, discouraging them from seeking help.
3. Use appropriate language: avoid outdated, negative or colloquial language. Journalists can unknowingly reinforce misleading stereotypes with terms including "mental patient", "insane", "psycho", "schizo", "maniac" or "deranged".
4. Use terms in the right context. Don't use psychiatric and medical terminology to describe non-medical

Reporting tips

- issues, for example, "schizophrenic stock exchange" or "psychotic dog". Don't describe a person with a mental illness as "psychotic" unless you can substantiate that the person is having a psychotic episode.
5. Avoid language that implies mental illness is a life sentence. To describe someone as "schizophrenic" implies that their condition is permanent and untreatable. It is better to describe a person as "receiving treatment for" the mental illness.
 6. Avoid reinforcing myths about mental illness. Reporting should never suggest that people with a mental illness are inherently violent, unpredictable, untrustworthy, weak or unable to get well.
 7. Respect the right to privacy. Don't focus on a person's mental illness

- unless it is a crucial part of the story. Always consider the potential good done by publishing against the potential harm.
8. Avoid the assumption that all mental illnesses are the same. The term mental illness covers a wide range of conditions. Don't suggest that people with a mental illness are all the same, or part of a single group in society.
 9. Prepare for interviews. Discuss the meaning of mental health terms before an interview so you are sure you understand them. Consider how stereotypes have influenced your thinking and if you have made any assumptions.
 10. Promote the use of mental health services. Include numbers and contact details of local help services for readers experiencing problems.

Source: Dept of Health and Aged Care

CASE STUDY 3: CRITICISM AND DISCUSSION

The Australian, Media, page 5
May 31- June 6, 2001

Attack was unjustified

WHAT a pathetic piece of "journalism" by journalism lecturer Lynette Sheridan Burns in her piece "Unhealthy stereotypes" (24/5).

She wasted a page attacking *The Herald Sun* over our coverage of murderer Neville Garden's escape, while breaking the most fundamental rules of journalism.

First, she failed to mention Garden's crime. For the record, he shot dead a milk-bar owner and tried to kill his wife in 1994. He was ordered to spend 18 years and nine months in a mental hospital.

Second, she failed to mention that Garden had escaped on a busy Sunday in the middle of Melbourne's biggest tourist precinct, Southbank, while on day leave.

Third, she failed to mention that Garden had only two days' medication and that police had warned, in writing, that he could become uncontrollably violent without that medication. Fourth, she failed to mention that Garden had told psychiatric staff he would kill again if given access to a firearm.

Furthermore, she made references to Garden being a "thorough gentleman" and, according to some people, "quiet, polite and friendly".

At no point did Sheridan Burns give this newspaper a right of reply.

We are aware of the sensitivities in reporting mental illness and have a code of practice covering this area. In this instance, a killer escapee's mental illness and lack of medication was an issue of public safety and we fulfilled our duty. I can't say the same for your contributor.

PETER BLUNDEN

Editor-in-chief

Herald and Weekly Times Ltd
Melbourne

The Australian, Media, page 5
June 7- June 13, 2001

Power to hurt

THE story "Unhealthy Stereotypes" (24/5) brought home to me a realisation of the power of words in the media, not only on the person being written about but their family and friends as well. Anyone who has a friend or relative with a mental illness, or a disability, suffers when stereotypes are used to create sensational headlines.

I would like to congratulate the writer of this article for bringing attention to the difficulties faced by people with mental illness and hope the media have a more caring approach reporting future stories.

TRICIA PAYNE
Edgeworth, NSW

27 May 2001

Dear Ms Sheridan Burns,

I heard your interview on the wireless with Derryn Hinch earlier in the week. I must congratulate you on your stance about how the people with schizophrenia are portrayed in the media in general. My daughter has suffered with this terrible and tragic illness for the last 14 years. She is very intelligent and very gentle and over the years I've met many people who suffer from the illness, but not one of them has been aggressive or violent. I wish more people could learn more about the illness and then these poor people wouldn't have such a hard time fitting into this uncaring society we live in.

Congratulations again.

Yours sincerely,

CASE STUDY 3: CRITICISM AND DISCUSSION

Interview between Derryn Hinch & Lynette Sheridan-Burns 3AW 25 May 2001

Good morning, and welcome to another Friday Edition, an end of the week edition of Hinch, here on Talk 1116. I'm taking your calls on any issue, any topic you'd like to raise this morning. Political, apolitical, moral, amoral, immoral, you name it. The talkback number is 98671116.

First up this morning, I want to go back to an issue from yesterday. The shocking story, the scandalous story revealed in the Herald Sun, that one of Australia's worst forms of criminals. A "cop killer", a man who executed an unarmed policeman, by overpowering him and taking his service revolver, has been out of gaol, on the loose on unsupervised leave. Robert Knowles still has at least 3 years to serve for the murder of policeman Maurice Moore, who he shot 5 times as he begged for his life, back in 1987. And this thug, "this peril to society", as the sentencing judge said, as he put him away for a minimum of 23 years, has been out mingling in the community. This piece of two legged garbage, who reportedly boasted "that the only good cop was a dead cop", has been outside on a visit to a bike shop, a golf course, a shopping centre and even apparently had an unescorted, unsupervised visit to his wife, while he was suppose to be attending a TAFE Course. His wife has since denied that. Why the killer of a policeman should even be out of gaol, at all, to go to a TAFE Course is another story. Why a cop killer is outside for any reason is a scandal.

Now, I was talking to the Secretary of the Police Association, Senior Sergeant Paul Mullet, yesterday. And he was understandably angry because being a policeman or policewoman is tough enough, it's risky enough, these days. But it is a travesty when a man, who kills an officer and is gaoled for more than 23 years minimum is out in the community enjoying privileges on unsupervised visits after less than 15 years. So no wonder serving policemen and former police officers are angry and again disillusioned.

Now Mullet mentioned in passing the case of another killer, Neville Garden, who was sentenced to 18 years in psychiatric care, after he stalked and killed a milk bar owner. He was let out for a Sunday afternoon jaunt at South Bank, during one of the busiest times, one of our busiest weekend attractions. Now Garden gave his so-called minders the slip and alluded police for nearly 5 days before being recaptured in country Victoria. And this scandal is made worse because the killer was on the loose for more then 24 hours before the public was even told he was missing. Victoria Police and the Thomas Emby Hospital hushed it all up, hoping he'd just go home, like one of Little Bo Beeps' lost sheep. And even when the Police Media Unit did release the report of the missing patient, they didn't even hint that this was a man who'd shot a man dead, and tried to kill his wife as she ran to his aid. And while they were putting up mamby pamby releases about a missing patient, the police themselves, in private station to station e-mails were warning that Garden was dangerous and was likely to turn violent as his medication wore off.

And the only way we found out this killer was on the loose, was because the Herald Sun ran that story. And the only way we, you, found out that a cop killer had been having conjugal visits outside of gaol was because the Herald Sun broke the story. Now this is not a Hinch PR campaign for that newspaper. I've criticised it often, as recently as yesterday. And what the papers say, I given specific articles and journalists a serve. But the same day, the biggest selling daily newspaper in this country does a public service by revealing that a man who'd murdered a police officer, has been out and about in the community, it cops a dreadful serve in a sister paper. In the Australian. I mention it at length, cause it shows how blinkered I think, the academic do-gooders can be in this community. Because the media lift-out in the newspaper, in the Australian, carries a critical article attacking the Herald Sun, savaging the Herald Sun, over it's coverage of the Neville Garden saga. An academic got upset because the newspaper, in its warning to the community, there was a derange killer in their midst, used words like deranged and talked about Garden being schizophrenic. And the Head of the Journalism Program at Newcastle University said those stories stigmatised hundreds of thousands living with serious mental illnesses.

So what, is it now politically incorrect to say that a man who could have been gaoled for murder was in a psychiatric hospital with mental problems had escaped. Now this is Noddy Land, the academic Lynette Sheridan-Burns, accused the newspaper of breaching every one of the federal guidelines on reporting mental illness. They said there were no facts in the story about whether Garden was experiencing a psychotic episode at the time of his escape and the newspaper also broke the rules by using such expressions as deranged killer and mental patient and paranoid schizophrenic. Well excuse me, that is what he was. The Professor listed some journalistic rules called "Reporting Tips". And the first says "Ensure that the headline makes links that

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are accurate and confirmed". Yep, fair enough. The Herald Sun headline, when Garden was finally captured and returned to gaol said "Killer Now Safe Behind Bars". But the comments from this cloistered world of academia gets worse. The Australian article also quotes at length a Professor Trevor Waring, and it is rather wearing. He's the Director of the Hunter Institute of Mental Health in NSW and he says, and I quote "It is just a myth that there are psychotic killers on the loose". Now, easy for him to say from his sanctuary in the NSW Wine Country. In the case of Neville Garden, there was a psychotic killer on the loose. He shot one innocent man dead as he was closing his milk bar for the night and he tried to kill his wife as she ran to his side. She felt the bullet go passed her hair. And this man was let out for a Sunday Arvo jaunt with 2 female guards, whom he easily gave the slip.

So rather than castigate the messenger, obviously the critics should perhaps be asking, "How crazy is a killer who manages to get out of a psychiatric hospital, renew his drivers licence, get a new passport, get access of \$3,000 in cash, buy camping equipment and then give all of the Victoria Police the slip for 4 days"?

On the Garden Case, I believe the Ivory Tower academics are trying to lead you up the garden path.

On the line right now, that professor I was talking about the Head of Journalism at the University of Newcastle, Lynette Sheridan-Burns, good morning.

LSB: Good morning Derryn, and I'm not a professor.

DH: Alright, I'll get that straight. And I should also point out that you and I go back a long way, cause I think I first hired you as a cadet back in the 1970's on the Sydney Sun.

LSB: You certainly did.

DH: Speaking of journal, don't you think you've gone over the top here on the Herald Sun?

LSB: Well, the point that I was making and the reason I wrote that article in the first place, Derryn, is that there wasn't, in 3 pages of coverage on Friday March 30, there wasn't a single line in those 3 pages that substantiated the claim that Neville Garden was a danger to the community. Now when I was doing my cadetship all those years ago, we were always exhorted that a man from Mars should be able to pick up the paper on any day and read a story and understand it and understand the context of it. If there had been a sentence in there that said, that police had indicated that Neville Garden was dangerous, that he had expressed violent attitudes or thought in the lead up to his escape, then I never would have written the article. Which...

DH: But you can't, hold on a minute, but you can't know as I know, because I have copies of the e-mails that the police were in fact sending each other to other police stations saying, yes he was dangerous, he should not be approached. Even media releases sent out said that he should not be approached and they said that as his medication wore off, he would, they were worried about him becoming dangerous.

LSB: Whether or not you or other journalists were privy to information that wasn't made public about the risk, my concern was that the reporting in the Herald Sun on that day, suggested that it was Neville Gardens schizophrenia that made him a violent and unpredictable person and that reinforces the idea that people with schizophrenia are necessarily violent. And that's just simply not the case.

DH: I don't agree that it smears all people who have schizophrenia, and when you say that this man was deranged, here is a man, do you know why he shot and killed the milk bar owner, do you know why?

LSB: Presumably, he was suffering from a psychotic episode at the time.

DH: A total stranger, who he'd liked his car, so he went back at 11 o'clock at night, having cased the joint and shot the man dead and then tried to shoot and kill his wife as she ran to his aid. That is a deranged, in my mind, that is a deranged and psychotic person.

LSB: But that was also 8, 9 years ago.

DH: M, that's true.

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LSB: And he's been receiving treatment for the last 9 years.

DH: True.

LSB: And so I don't think that the fact that he was deranged in 1994, when he shot someone necessarily mean that he's deranged now. I had a call from Peter Michelborough from the Herald Sun, yesterday, who was upset by the coverage and he said to me "but he was a deranged killer" and I said "well, he was in 1994, how do you know he is 2001". There's nothing in the report to indicate that.

DH: OK, you're upset that journalists should not use words like mental patient. What would you have called Neville Garden.

LSB: No, that's not me that upset, Derryn, the...

DH: Department of Health and Aged Care.

LSB: Yeah, the people that are responsible.

DH: How are we meant to describe the person who escaped from a psychiatric hospital, Thomas Embly Hospital, which is a place for psychiatric people, why can't I call him a mental patient, why can't I call him insane, why can't I call him deranged.

LSB: Because I think that you will find that most people understand the word deranged to mean that someone is confused and not thinking clearly and is volatile and unpredictable. And the facts about mental illness is that even a person who's not receiving treatment for schizophrenia is not delusional all the time.

DH: No, this man obviously is not because he was sane enough to get out of the hospital, where he was being held for 18 years of treatment, to get a passport, to get a drivers licence,, to get a crane drivers licence, to go out and buy camping equipment to hide out in the bush.

LSB: Yeah, and when you look at the actual reporting, and it's not the facts of the case, so much as the reporting that I was concerned about. When you look at the reporting for substantiation of the threat posed by Neville Garden, the quotes that they used said things like "he was a kind and gentle person" "he's got a heart of gold" "he's pleasant, friendly, not intrusive" "I hope he's not frightened" "he seemed very tired" "he was a thorough gentleman". There is nothing in the quotes to substantiate the notion that this man was a danger to the public. Now if he was a danger to the public and there had been substantiation of that, one sentence in there saying that Police said "that Garden was dangerous and should not be approached in any circumstances" then I wouldn't have written the article. I think a killer on the loose is an important story and people need to know about it.

DH: Actually, the point is here, they treated him like all the things you were saying for 24 hours. The public did not know that a killer was on the loose for 24 hours. And the fact, you make a point, I think, about the fact, the men with guns, the policeman were there in tow tow to arrest him. Well then, surely the man and they did send out e-mails saying "this man is dangerous and the public should not approach him" that was put out by Victoria Police.

LSB: Yes but was it reported to the public?

DH: Well I don't know, I reported it, I presume it was reported in the Herald Sun. I mean the headline, I cut it out here, "Killer Now Safe Behind Bars" why would that upset you. That is the fact of the matter, a killer was now arrested and safe behind bars after being on the loose and not being able to be found for 4 days.

LSB: I don't think that I suggested that that headline was inaccurate or distressing. I think that when it comes to headlines, the fact that page 2 of the Herald Sun ran a connected headline "Caught told patient assaulted girl 6" about a different person, who was at a different institution and on a different day was very misleading and looking at the paper, one might think that was Neville Garden.

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- DH: Yes, I'll grant you that, and I also think a shocking thing that was done was, you may not be aware of it up there, was that that photograph that was used in the paper of Garden being escorted by 4 policeman....
- LSB: Was set up afterwards.
- DH: Was a re-enactment cause they missed it, so they took him back out there.
- LSB: That doesn't really reinforce the idea that he was a volatile and dangerous person. If he complied with the polices' request to re-enact his recapture for the benefit of the media, that actually would suggest that he's a fairly compliant individual doesn't it.
- DH: The point that you're trying to stress is us, by journalists like me and the newspapers, saying things like he's deranged or he's insane that seems to slur every person with schizophrenia in this country and I think that's drawing a hell of a long bow.
- LSB: I think that what I was saying, is that to report about Neville Garden being a risk to the community because he killed somebody is fair enough. To say that he is necessary and inherently violent and unpredictable because he has schizophrenia is drawing a long bow.
- DH: Yeh, well, I think in this case, a man from his background and what he had done, I think we're entitled to describe him, I think you've been unfair on the newspaper, I think you've used a very large hammer.
- LSB: Well, I think I must have struck a nerve.
- DH: Well it did with me over lunch yesterday, that's quite right, as I was reading it. Anyway Lynette it's good to talk to you and good to see you kick on with all that great basic training.
- LSB: Well I certainly wouldn't assert anything I didn't substantiate for a piece of journalism, Derryn.
- DH: Alright, Lynette, thanks for your time, bye.
- LSB: Ok, Bye.
- DH: The Head of Journalism at the University of Newcastle, Lynette Sheridan-Burns.