

# Guide for other officers of the court for working with the media about mental illness

Courts are a valuable source of information for the media about incidents and cases where mental illness may be raised. In fact, having mental illness raised in court may make a particular case more 'newsworthy'. Through court proceedings, journalists are privy to details about a person's mental health status, past mental ill health and claims made by witnesses and experts called to give testimony. While magistrates and other court officials may not talk directly to the media or seek out media coverage on a regular basis, their general dealings with journalists may have an impact on the way a story is developed.

## Key Issues for Other Officers of the Court

**Consider the potential impact of a particular story and whether to make official media comment.**

- Find out what the journalist needs, including the angle for the story. Is the issue about a judgement in a particular case, or more generally about the relationship between mental illness and the courts?
- Consider whether the story has the potential to contribute to better understanding of mental health and mental illness in the wider community. There may be an opportunity to include information that will assist in understanding how mental illness is dealt with in the courts.
- While you always have the option of saying no to the journalist, you may also want to consider the impact of not participating in a story. That is, the story may still be run without expert comment and advice. This may sometimes be worse than participating.

**Where appropriate, provide information about treatment and support options for people living with mental illness.**

- Stories that involve mental illness may prompt someone who is concerned about themselves or someone they know to seek help. Media stories sourced to the courts rarely have information about where to seek help or where to access further information for people who may be directly or indirectly affected by mental illness.
- Where possible provide media professionals with helpline numbers and information and suggest that the information is included in the report.

It is important to provide support information relevant to the audience of each story. For most reports it will be appropriate to cite a national helpline such as the one provided by SANE Australia on 1800 18 SANE (7263).

### **In interviews or any other interactions, check that your language is appropriate and that it does not stigmatise mental illness.**

- The language used when reporting on mental illness can contribute to stereotypes, myths and stigma. Journalists may be unlikely to edit 'direct quotes' from interviews, press releases or transcripts.
- It is important that the language used is consistent with suggestions provided to media professionals. Remember that your comments potentially reach many members of the community.
- Avoid negative language such as 'mental patient', 'lunatic', 'schizo', 'psycho' etc.
- Avoid labelling a person by their mental illness. A person is not 'a schizophrenic', they are 'currently experiencing', 'being treated for' or 'have a diagnosis of schizophrenia'.
- Be careful not to imply that all mental illnesses are the same and ensure that correct terminology is used when a diagnosis is referred to.
- Do not use diagnostic terms unless the diagnosis has been confirmed by a medical professional.
- Be aware of the language you use when referring to someone leaving hospital – e.g. a person is 'discharged' from hospital not 'released' and they 'leave' or 'go missing', they don't 'escape'.

Victim impact statements are very powerful and often used by journalists to add emotion and human interest to a story. These statements may include comments about the mental health of either the accused or the victim themselves.

These statements may provide an opportunity to highlight the impact of traumatic events on someone's mental health, where the victim details how the event has affected them and their family. These statements, however, may also perpetuate fear and misunderstanding about mental illness, especially where an offender is described using derogatory language that implies the existence of a mental illness.

### **Be mindful not to reinforce common myths and stereotypes about mental illness**

- The type of information presented in court, and subsequent media reports, may reinforce stereotypes such as those that link mental illness with violence or suggest people with mental illness are unable to work, parent or lead fulfilling lives.
- Consider whether it is appropriate to provide some context surrounding an incident. For example, where violence occurs it is often in the context of drug use, distressing hallucinations or treatment that has been ceased or ineffective.
- Some stories gain additional prominence and national attention because of a seemingly extraordinary frame, usually taken from court testimony or comments from a judge.

### **Refer journalists to *Mindframe***

- Are the journalists covering the courts or conducting an interview aware of the *Mindframe* guidelines for reporting mental illness?

- Is there an opportunity to recommend that journalists access the site for appropriate helpline numbers and contact details for mental health organisations that may be able to assist with the story?
- It is recommended that the *Mindframe* website – [www.mindframe.org.au](http://www.mindframe.org.au) – be added to the bottom of all correspondence with media professionals that may involve mental illness.
- You may want to designate at least one person who can discuss ‘ways of reporting mental illness’ with media professionals who approach your jurisdiction and ensure they are aware of the *Mindframe* resources for media professionals. This may be a public affairs unit or an identified media liaison representative.