

Suggestion to the Leveson Inquiry on Culture, Practice and Ethics of the Press

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I am an academic at the University of Lincoln; my area of work is spread across journalism and biomedical science. I mainly teach in journalism but I also contribute to teaching on a BSc Biomedical Science Course.

On the journalism side I teach about the reporting of health issues in the media among other things. I have a good few years experience of research in medical ethics and law and of medical research methodology and I am at present closely following the issues arising out of journalism ethics.

In my academic work I examine the quality of stories in the press and broadcast media by tracing back the sources through the science magazines as is often the case to the scientists and science journals where they originated. My own experience tells me that this process very often leads to highly distorted press coverage of certain diseases and medical interventions. This is sometimes the result of an inability of journalists to understand scientific processes or occasionally a consequence of a media obsessed by sensationalism and exposés. In many cases the signal lack of accuracy and in many cases journalistic responsibility is leading to a dissemination of poor quality and often dangerous reporting.

I have no doubt that the effect of press coverage has an effect in several areas:

- Increasing demands for medical interventions that in some cases may be unnecessary
- Causing stress and anxiety in populations, itself a major cause of ill health
- Creating moral panics about both disease incidence and matters of confidence in health care provision
- In extreme cases causing lifestyle changes in vulnerable populations that may be hazardous to health.

There is a marked higher quality of medical reporting in broadcast media when compared to that in print. With the exception of the quality press especially the Guardian whose medical reporting is level headed and properly researched most of the purported health coverage in the tabloids is of very bad quality. Poor quality reporting on health is an ethical issue.

The Social Issues Research Centre in partnership with the Royal Institution produced in September 2000 rule of thumb guidelines on public interest when reporting science and health. This very simple to understand code of practice goes as follows. You are a journalist reporting on health research, you have a close relative who is suffering from the condition you are about to report on; your story is likely to be the main source of information on the subject seen by your relative. Would you be comfortable with a close relative reading this story? As simple as that message is to understand and apply it is almost universally ignored by elements of the tabloid media.

I would propose to the Leveson Inquiry that this rule of thumb be encompassed into any regulatory framework recommended for the future regulation of press ethics.

Statement of Truth

I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed



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