

This is the unedited version of the Media Bites column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in February 2000. The published version may have had minor changes.

Media Bites: WHEN A WHINGE CAN HELP

You become used to receiving complaints when working as a journalist. Some are no more than transparent attempts by vested interests to use your story as an excuse to talk about their favourite issue. The anti-vaccine lobby and private health industry are particularly adept at this. Some complaints come as a complete surprise. I once wrote in a story that a woman “fell pregnant”. Never again will I make that mistake. After many angry letters and phone calls, I realised that some people find the phrase offensive. It’s just that I’d never thought about it that way before. The AIDS lobby has had a huge impact on media reporting. Back in the bad old 80’s, journalists who wrote about “AIDS victims” or, even worse, about “innocent AIDS victims” were quickly made to understand why this was upsetting to people with the disease. To some extent, this lesson has probably carried over to reporting in other areas.

Mental illness is one area where the media often continues to perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes and prejudices.

But now SANE Australia (formerly the Schizophrenia Australia Foundation) is fighting back. It has established a website called StigmaWatch, which documents inappropriate media reports and advertising (see <http://www.sane.org/>).

It also logs the media’s response to the complaint.

Dr Paul Morgan, SANE’s deputy director, says media coverage can have a powerful effect, both on individuals affected by mental illness as well in forming broader community views.

“Many people have never knowingly met anyone that has a mental illness, so they’re completely reliant on the picture given in the media,” he says.

“And when someone grows up having these attitudes, and then they develop an illness, they can find it hard to admit they’ve got an illness or to seek help.”

The first reports on the site are a good illustration of why it can be worthwhile to have a whinge:

* When the food company Nestlé launched three confectionery brands in the United States, called 'Psychos Sam', 'Loony Jerry' and 'Weird Wally', SANE Australia and its sister organisation in America

complained loudly. Nestlé replied that these brands would not be sold in Australia, and they were also being withdrawn in the USA.

* An article in *The Age* last October, “Why let media barons produce barren media?,” began with the sentence: “Is Australia schizophrenic?”. SANE complained to the journalist that this perpetuated the inaccurate association of “split personality” with schizophrenia. The journalist apologised and said he would not do it again.

* An advertisement in the *Good Weekend* magazine for Jansz champagne was headed “Obsessive-compulsive bubbly”. A complaint was sent to Yalumba Wines noting this was an inappropriate, misleading and hurtful reference to obsessive-compulsive disorder, and requesting the ad not be published again in this form. The company said it regretted the ad had caused offence, noting that the campaign was now coming to a close.

* *The Australian Jewish News* carried an article saying that “to attempt to be both Jewish and Christian at once is spiritual schizophrenia”. SANE has not yet received a response to its complaint. Maybe some people would deride such moves as political correctness. Personally, I’ve never quite understood why political correctness cops such a bad press.

If you deliberately set out to offend people through your choice of language, then it could be argued that is your prerogative in a land of free speech. But if you are unintentionally upsetting people through a careless or thoughtless choice of words, then surely that’s a different issue.

It can’t hurt to let media folk know if their words are doing damage. I’d hope that most of my colleagues are open-minded enough to consider complaints on their merits, especially if politely put.

Just remember, though, that journalists don’t usually write the headlines on their stories. That’s the job of sub-editors. No point wasting a complaint through misdirection.

Reports can be made to StigmaWatch via fax (03 9682 5944), email (sane@sane.org) or via the web page.

And feel free to send your favourite media whinges to me at the address below.