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Media Bites: THE DEPRESSING NEWS ABOUT JEFF KENNETT

Meg Smith didn't do her homework before agreeing to be interviewed by Mike Willessee in the early 80s. It didn't occur to her that the program would be broadcast around the country and that her family would see her talking about having severe depression.

But the main reason she was surprised when family members rang afterwards was that they began to talk, for the first time, about her mental illness. It was as if the mere fact of being on TV, even though she had been talking about suicide and other grim issues, had given legitimacy to her experience.

Smith, the president of the NSW Mental Health Association and a senior lecturer at the University of Western Sydney, has since given many more interviews. Some have been shockers, but on balance she believes the process has been very useful.

"Telling your story helps you deal with it," she says. Feedback from the public - sometimes years after an interview - suggests it has also been useful for others, in giving them permission to talk about their problems.

"The process of being on TV is very positive," she says. "People overlook the content."

Smith recently addressed a seminar for journalists held by beyondblue, the Jeff Kennett-led anti-depression initiative. It was unusual in many respects, not least being the presence of journalists from regional and remote areas (even Thursday Island) who don't usually make it to these sort of events.

One of the initiative's aims is to improve public awareness and understanding of depression, and thus help overcome the stigma which often surrounds it and discourages people from seeking help.

The question of whether any publicity is good publicity is a thorny one for beyondblue. As noted by its chief executive officer, psychiatrist Ian Hickie, Kennett represents both a danger and an opportunity. His

involvement virtually guarantees media interest, as witnessed by extensive reporting of the seminar. But the danger, as Hickie told delegates, is that the media will only want to report on Kennett.

In his inimitable style, Kennett then stood up and publicly rebuffed his colleague. "I've never heard so much crap in all my life," he said, suggesting there is at least one person who cannot imagine that Kennett might ever be a problem for anyone.

But his performance during the seminar suggests just that. He fumbled statistics, wrongly claiming that depression is set to become the world's second greatest killer, and several of his comments left mental health professionals and consumer representatives cringing.

Kennett's widely-reported personal story of avoiding depression through self discipline learnt in military service is likely to only reinforce negative stereotypes of depression as an individual weakness. Similarly, his comment (when arguing that depression efforts need to learn from work in AIDS) that "many of us may not be comfortable with the physical act that causes AIDS" is hardly sensitive. It is also wrong; last I heard, AIDS was caused by a virus.

Kennett also said he would like to do with depression what has been done with breast cancer. There's no doubt that a raised public profile has translated into greater political clout for the breast cancer lobby, and that there have been improvements in care. But there is also evidence that many women overstate their personal risk of breast cancer at the same time as mammography uptake rates remain less than ideal.

If you believe that depression is more than a biological condition and can also reflect social and environmental ills, then it is hard to escape the irony of Kennett's involvement in beyondblue. As the Public Health Association's Peter Sainsbury noted, the two governments behind the initiative (which was conceived by Kennett's and then taken up by Howard's) "have systematically undermined social structures".

No doubt Kennett would consider all this a load of crap. And maybe Meg Smith is right - that simply gaining media space can be more important than what is actually reported. Then again, Smith also told another poignant story - about a woman who collected every article on depression from her country town newspaper. Unable to talk about her

problem with anyone, the paper was her only source of information. So it's worth making an effort to get the content right too.