

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2004. Minor changes may have been made to the published piece.

Media Bites: Mea Culpa

Dr Grace Groom still remembers what she was doing when Senator Helen Coonan suggested to ABC radio listeners that people with anxiety and depression were malingerers who should hurry back to work.

Dr Groom, chief executive officer of the Mental Health Council of Australia, was so shocked that she choked on her cereal and spilt her morning cuppa.

She soon hit the phone, organising for various heavyweights in mental health to put out a press release calling for the Minister for Revenue and Assistant Treasurer to be sacked.

Dr Groom took a deep breath after the release went out in October 2002. Senior bureaucrats had advised against it, and urged her to resolve any concerns behind closed doors.

“We are predominantly government-funded, so you do need to think carefully about these things,” Dr Groom says.

“But we felt our credibility with our constituency would have really suffered if we hadn’t done anything. Plus I felt very angry. I thought her comments were outrageous and trivialised the suffering of people living with depression.”

What a difference a year can make.

On her birthday last October, Senator Coonan received flowers from Dr Groom. It was also the day that Senator Coonan became the Council’s inaugural patron.

She had had the guts to make a public apology. And, more importantly, she actually seems to have meant it, judging by her subsequent work with the Council on a number of projects.

Professor Ian Hickie, clinical advisor to beyondblue, once condemned Senator Coonan's comments as "grossly offensive" but now sings her praises, describing her as one of the few politicians who really "gets" mental health.

The new-found enthusiasm for Senator Coonan no doubt also reflects the scarcity of political champions in the area.

"Mental health needs all the friends it can get," was the somewhat plaintive cry from Professor Beverley Raphael, director of NSW's Centre for Mental Health, in a recent magazine article detailing numerous problems with care.

Minister Tony Abbott clearly doesn't see mental health as a key election issue demanding his attention, having delegated carriage of the area to his offsider Ms Trish Worth.

"The disappointment would be that it demonstrates mental health is not one of his personal priorities," says SANE Australia's Barbara Hocking. "So mental health risks staying on the backburner."

Ms Hocking believes mental health will never become a political priority until the media gives it the attention now reserved for surgical waiting lists and breast cancer .

"The challenge," she adds, "is to ensure the media embraces it in a constructive way."

Meanwhile, Professor Hickie contrasts Senator Coonan's dramatic U-turn with the AMA's diffident response when its Dr David Rivett came under fire for referring to the mentally ill in a media statement as loons.

The AMA expressed regret but also defended the use of "colourful language" to attract media attention.

The AMA should have known better.

And so should I.

Several years ago the University of Sydney's Professor Simon Chapman asked me to provide a list of my intray contents for use in his media advocacy courses.

I was uncomfortably reminded that I had included on the list "some faxes from persistent loonies" when I saw a presentation by Professor Chapman at a recent conference. Mea culpa.