

Psychiatric Myths and Lies in the Corporate Media - a small sample

by Don Weitz

(This article is a substantially revised and shorter version of a chapter titled “Challenging Mainstream Media-Psychiatry’s Cheerleaders” in the forthcoming e-book *Rise Up/Fight Back: Selected Writings of an Antipsychiatry Activist*)

In a democratic system of thought control...[it is] necessary to take over the entire spectrum of opinion, the entire spectrum of discussion, so that nothing can be thinkable apart from the party line; not just that it be obeyed, but that you can't even think of anything else.

– Noam Chomsky, linguist and political activist (2003)

The myths and stereotypes surrounding “mental illness” and the “violent mental patient” are unfortunately alive and well. Medical reporters and columnists, editors and producers in the mainstream, corporate-controlled media in Canada and the United States constantly parrot psychiatry’s discredited medical model of “mental illness,” “mental health,” “safe and effective medication” and “lifesaving” electroshock as though they were proven scientific facts. I charge the corporate-controlled media with promoting fraud – presenting psychiatric opinion and “mental health” ideology as “medical science.” They air psychiatric propaganda – psychobabble – almost every day, repeating like a mantra that “schizophrenia” is a brain disease; that “bipolar mood disorder” is caused by a “chemical imbalance in the brain”; that “Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder” (ADHD) is a neurological disorder. In fact it’s another psychiatric fraud. All are false claims, unsupported in the medical and scientific literature. So-called objective and balanced articles and TV specials on “mental illness” or “mental health” broadcasts by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), CNN and published in *The Toronto Star*, *The Globe & Mail* and the New York Times never cite credible medical or scientific evidence to support such claims – because there is none. Nevertheless, we’re asked to believe this psychiatric nonsense, myths and lies masquerading as “medical science.”

I also charge the corporate-controlled media with elitism. Personal statements, and in particular psychiatric survivors’ testimony, that criticize forced drugging and electroshock and promote non-medical alternatives are routinely dismissed, as “anecdotal” or not credible, or, even more commonly, edited out of major news stories on “depression,” “schizophrenia” and “mental health.” Where are the alleged balance and fairness on which the corporate media pride themselves?

When reporting on research findings that support psychiatric claims of the alleged safety and effectiveness of psychiatric treatments, the media generally oversimplify them and overstate their scientific credibility and social significance. Challenges of such claims are extremely rare. At the same time, studies whose findings do challenge – or flatly contradict – the notion that these treatments work and are safe are glossed over. For example, studies that expose the fraudulence of the diagnostic label Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and the addictive effects and violent behaviour triggered by highly addictive amphetamine drugs used to “treat” this so-called disorder (e.g., Ritalin and Adderall) are rarely or never cited, much less discussed. And, although scientific studies conducted over the last ten years have proven conclusively that Prozac,

Paxil and other SSRI antidepressants frequently trigger “suicidal ideation,” suicide attempts and mania in young people and others, the media did not even begin reporting on these alarming “side effects” until three or four years ago. It’s time to challenge corporate media’s pro-psychiatry spin on these and other “mental health” issues.

Psychiatrists and other “mental health experts” – and, primarily, Big Pharma and its spin-doctors – market their nonsense to the media as scientific fact. It has been thirty years since I began to criticize media depictions of “mental health” issues as serious distortions, if not outright lies.

In March 1999, increasingly annoyed with the Canadian media’s pro-psychiatry ‘coverage’ of mental health issues, I wrote and sent an open letter titled “Who’s Really Dangerous? Media Bias-Forced Drugging-Outpatient Committal” to *The Toronto Star*, *The Globe & Mail*, *The Toronto Sun*, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). No editor or producer replied, the letter was never published. Here are a few edited excerpts:

The belief that most psychiatric survivors are more dangerous or violent than so-called “normal” or “sane” people is a common myth and stereotype propagated by the mainstream media, biological psychiatrists like E. Fuller Torrey (an American psychiatrist who wants to lock up and forcibly drug “the mentally ill homeless”) and family “advocacy” organizations such as the Schizophrenia Society of Canada and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill in the United States. Since there has never been any substantial scientific evidence to support this view, it [can legitimately be seen as] a false belief or delusion. The following conclusions from several respected health professionals, researchers and advocates expose this myth:

[There is] “...sensationalized reporting by the media whenever a violent act is committed by ‘a former mental patient’...a weak association [exists] between mental disorders and violence...serious violence by people with major mental disorders appears concentrated in a small fraction.... Mental disorders...account for a minuscule portion of the violence that afflicts American society.

– J. Monahan, PhD, and J. Arnold: “Violence by People with Mental Illness: A Consensus Statement,” Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, Spring 1996

The combined evidence from these studies indicates that...persons with psychotic diagnoses are less likely or at least no more likely to commit violence...a history of delusions and a diagnosis of paranoia were unrelated to future violence.

– G.T. Harris, PhD, and M. Rice, PhD: “Risk Appraisal and Management of Violent Behavior” in Psychiatric Services, vol. 48 no .9, September 1997

Most patients with severe mental illness do not pose a danger to themselves or the community.

– J.W. Coid, MD: “Dangerous patients with mental illness: Increased risks warrant new policies, adequate resources, and appropriate legislation” in British Medical Journal, April 13, 1996

It's time that, as a society, we begin to knock down stereotypes and start breaking down the stigma associated with "mental disorders". The first stereotype to go down – permanently, we hope – is that people who suffer from depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, an eating disorder, or any other type of mental disorder are somehow more violent than others. This simply isn't true, [except in some cases where they are also] involved in substance abuse. Most people who suffer from a mental disorder are not violent – there is no need to fear them. Embrace them for who they are – normal human beings experiencing a difficult time, who need your open mind, caring attitude, and helpful support.

– J.M. Grohol, PhD: "Dispelling the violence myth" (online editorial, Mental Health Net <http://www.cmhc.com/archives.editor32.htm>, 1998, June 1)

Despite these professional criticisms, the media continue to publish "balanced" articles on "mental health" that exaggerate the alleged link between mental illness and violence; demonize homeless and poor people who have psychiatric histories; promote a medical model/psychiatric bias and generally refuse to publish critical comments from psychiatric survivors and dissident health professionals

The lack of response to this letter speaks volumes about the mainstream media's defensiveness, their need to dismiss or deny legitimate criticism, and their routine promotion of psychiatric propaganda as medical science or scientific fact.

Psychiatric propaganda and mental health promotionals continue to be churned out by the mainstream-corporate media – psychiatry's cheerleaders. That's nothing to cheer about. They must be directly and forcefully challenged, thoroughly exposed and publicly denounced as libel and outright lies.