

BBC rarely covers depression research

There has been a dearth of stories about research into depression covered by the BBC over the last decade, even though an estimated six million adults in the UK have either depression or an anxiety disorder (The Depression Report, June 2006).

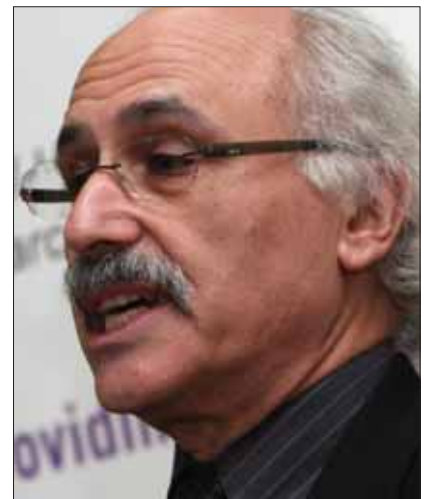
An analysis of stories broadcast between 1999 and 2008 showed that the BBC is more likely to highlight the results of research about Alzheimer's disease than any other mental health problem. According to the Alzheimer's Society, some 417,000 people in the UK have the disease.

'Compared with the number of people who have a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease and the number of people who have a diagnosis of depression, research into Alzheimer's is over-reported by the BBC and research into depression is under-reported,' said Professor George Szmulker. He leads the tranche of work at the National

Institute for Health Research Mental Health Research Network (NIHR MHRN) that aims to get members of the public, service users and their families interested and involved in research.

The analysis, carried out by consultancy Evaluametrics on behalf of the NIHR MHRN, set out to discover whether mental health and neuroscience research reported by the BBC was representative of research undertaken in the field, and whether the mental health problems the BBC chooses to focus on reflect the experiences of its viewers and listeners.

Evaluametrics used the BBC's web-based archive as a source and



George Szmulker: aiming to get members of the public, service users and their families interested and involved in mental health research.

found 1,317 stories about mental health and neuroscience research that had been broadcast during the 10-year period.

More than a quarter of the stories (26.3 per cent) were based on research about the workings of

the brain, classed as neuroscience for the purposes of analysis.

The rest were about mental health problems, with Alzheimer's at the top of the list (18 per cent). Only seven per cent put the spotlight on depression.

Of the total number of stories, 951 had one or more commentators, with representatives from the Alzheimer's Society and Alzheimer's Research Trust most frequently invited to talk about the implications and consequences of the results.

The BBC's news priorities in mental health research may not be in line with public interest, however. The Evaluametrics team looked at the number of 'hits' on the BBC website for three stories about depression and three stories about Alzheimer's that were posted during the last two years. The depression stories received more than one million hits between them, while the three items about Alzheimer's received a total 123,157.

'This is a tiny sample, and there may well be other reasons for the imbalance of interest,' said Grant Lewison from Evaluametrics. 'We would need to measure public reaction in more detail before we could be sure of conclusions.'

The next step though, says George Szmukler, is to try to find out from the BBC how they decide which topics to cover. 'We are also going to do further research to analyse coverage of mental health research in newspapers and science magazines. It's very important for the public to have some understanding of mental health research, and the media has a large contribution to that understanding.'

'There are commonly held but mistaken beliefs that there are no effective treatments for mental illness, and knowing about research that has led to new knowledge and the development of treatments that make a difference can help dispel those beliefs. A greater understanding



Grant Lewison: 'The way research is reported in the mass media has an influence on the general public and on policy makers.'

of research can also help reduce the stigma and discrimination that still surrounds a diagnosis of a mental illness.'

Grant Lewison adds: 'The way research is reported in the mass media has an influence on the general public – they might go and ask their doctor for a new treatment they have read about, for example, or donate to charity after seeing TV coverage of results of research a charity has supported. Coverage also has an influence on policy makers who decide about research priorities and funding.'

The Evaluametrics analysis of BBC coverage also showed a bias towards the work of UK-based research teams. Nearly one-third of the papers that prompted a story had a UK address, and nearly one-third of those were based in London. Research in this country that had been financially supported by the Wellcome Trust was more likely to be picked up by journalists than research funded by other organisations.

The team from Evaluametrics looked at the mental health and neuroscience research completed in 14 countries for the same period to see how representative the BBC

coverage was of global results. They found UK research to be over-represented, as were results from the USA and Sweden. Research from Germany, Japan and Spain barely featured in the BBC stories.

Coverage of research into other mental health problems was also low when compared to the numbers of people affected by them.

'Many of the stories the BBC covered were about the incidence and possible causes of particular disorders,' said Grant Lewison. 'Treatment by medication was frequently mentioned, but there were not many stories about talking therapies. Lifestyle – choices available to an individual – featured in as many stories as genetic effects.'

The analysis showed the BBC also called on spokesmen and women from academic institutions, with experts from the Institute of Psychiatry (IoP) at King's College London being asked to give their opinion more often as the decade continued. In the first five years, 2.4 per cent of the stories had an IoP/King's commentator – the number went up to 4.1 per cent in the second half of the period analysed.

'Finding out about the media's response to mental health research will also help us plan how best to disseminate the findings of research supported by the NIHR MHRN,' said George Szmukler. He is based at the IoP, which together with the University of Manchester, coordinates the activities of the NIHR MHRN.

A greater awareness of mental health research and its value may also make people more willing to volunteer to take part in studies, he said. 'It's therefore very appropriate for the NIHR MHRN, with a key remit of enhancing the recruitment of participants in mental health research, to play a significant role in fostering awareness among the general public.'



BBC stories of mental disorder and neuroscience research, 1992-1998, and the papers that they cite, Grant Lewison and Philip Roe, Evaluametrics.

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