

on 0800 789321.

While the act may be a necessary protection against terrorist incidents, it has been heavily criticised by civil liberties groups. In practice, the act has been used by the police to stop and search protesters at an international arms fair in Docklands, and to prevent peaceful protest at an RAF station against the Iraq war.

Additionally, BACP's guideline on confidentiality<sup>2</sup> is being revised to include up-to-date advice.

To summarise briefly, there are two main laws at present that require you to disclose information obtained by you through a counselling relationship. It is important to be informed about such eventualities and to discuss potential situations with your line manager and the college authorities. To win an argument in 'peace time' and devise a suitable policy or memorandum of understanding may be easier than when the chips are down and you are suddenly faced with information with which you are uncomfortable but know that you have to do something with.

It is therefore timely to confer with colleagues, supervisors and managers to make sure that all come to a shared understanding of these matters so that clients', practitioners' and managers' expectations are realistic and within the law. ■

#### References

1 Jenkins P. *Counselling, psychotherapy and the law*. 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications; in press.

2 Bond T, Jamieson A. *Confidentiality: counselling and the law*. Rugby: BACP; 2003. See also: Bond T. *Confidentiality guidelines for college counsellors in FE and sixth form colleges*. Rugby: BACP; 2004. BACP information sheets are available to download in the members' area of the BACP website: [www.bacp.co.uk/members/info\\_sheets/index.html](http://www.bacp.co.uk/members/info_sheets/index.html)

# Dealing with the media



The gains from media coverage and publicity can be extensive. But is it always of benefit to the organisation or might it be detrimental? **Gilly White** explores some of the potential benefits and drawbacks of agreeing to an interview or undertaking any publicity work

Over the past few years there has been an increase in the number of enquiries from the press about counselling in educational settings, including HE and FE. In September 2006 *The Times* interviewed Dave Berger for an article entitled 'Fresher first aid – how to survive student life'. This is typical of the kinds of requests received by BACP and AUCC, especially at critical periods in the educational year such as exam time or the beginning of term.

Recently there have been articles stating that Islamic fundamentalists are using universities as recruiting grounds. Stories such as these can be divisive and raise particularly emotive issues. While it may seem fine to give an immediate comment to clear things up, it is best to take a contact number and tell the journalist that you or a colleague will call them back.

The media can whip up a storm over issues and it is prudent not to agree to interviews about controversial subjects unless your organisation has a very clear line on them, even though it can be tempting to try to put journalists' assumptions straight.

Many seemingly innocent comments can reflect badly on an organisation no matter how they were meant. People can become angry that their organisation has

become embroiled in an issue. Giving an opinion on an emotive issue may result in complaints from clients who feel misrepresented by association, or ignored because their point of view has not been expressed. If a counselling service were to comment about an emotive issue then it is likely that many students would be deterred from using the service. At the very least the service would receive complaints for getting involved and this can be disheartening and time consuming. The reputation created by bad press lingers far longer than positive press coverage.

One of the main advantages of publicity and positive press coverage is the possibility of changing attitudes and behaviour, and communicating your message to those who might not otherwise receive it. While paid advertising works for some, educational establishments do not have infinite amounts of cash to spend on advertising, and even if they did, not everyone would read the advertisements. An article in a lifestyle or special interest magazine can reach an audience that you may not have been able to target through the usual channels. BACP receives many calls from people who have read about the Association in the press and not realised that counselling might be able to help them.

Coverage can also confirm and reflect the positive job being done by staff and volunteers. It is morale boosting to read about the work being undertaken by your organisation and positive coverage always helps when negotiating with senior management, whatever the issue.

However, if your team is under pressure and close to breaking point, promoting your services via positive press coverage merely increases this pressure. Publicity might seem a good idea but can sometimes pile on the pressure for small teams and although it is excellent to receive recognition you often find many unexpected people beating a path to your door. Calls from clients, salespeople, researchers and the media will all increase. This is not usually a huge problem but if your team is severely understaffed it is worth bearing in mind.

Another consideration should be hurt feelings. It is common for interviews to be edited and shortened and it can be disheartening to see that only a few sentences have actually made it into print, especially if you have given a long interview. It is easy to feel let down and as though an opportunity has been lost to promote student counselling services or to highlight the good work being done. However, if those few words portray the work you wish to promote in a positive light it is likely to have been well worth the effort.

In the worse case, quotes can be made up and attributed to people who did not say them. This is rare, but it does occasionally happen. If you have been misquoted then contact the publication concerned and ask for a correction to be made.

Never ever say anything 'off the record' to a journalist. While most journalists would regard an off-the-record comment as just that, some may not. It is risky to say anything to a journalist that you would not be happy reading in print. Most interviews are conducted by phone and can be recorded. If an issue backfired and a controversial interview had been taped, this would destroy your reputation and that of the organisation you work for. It only takes one 'incorrect' word.

Journalists usually make contact by phone or email and this may be direct or via another department in your

organisation. If the request for an interview comes from your press office, the press officer should be able to give you a clear idea of what is required. It is likely your press officer will give you some background about the journalist, ie the publication they work for and their special interest areas.

When faced with an enquiry from a journalist it is easy to feel under pressure to answer questions and to justify yourself. However, if you do not feel comfortable with a particular journalist, do not feel that you have to agree to an interview. Also, if you have reservations about any press enquiries then go with your instinct. Most journalists, however, will be grateful that you are helping them and are not out to trick you.

If you do decide to participate in an interview, whether by phone or in person, always remember to ask questions of the interviewer. If you are not clear about the purpose of the interview or the questions they are asking, you can always request a list of questions in advance and some information about the project they are undertaking. If you dislike the line of questioning, do not feel obliged to carry on. Even when asked a direct question, you can always reply 'The question I really want to answer is...'. In some instances you will be able to see the final text of an interview, if time allows, and correct any mistakes.

If you work in a team and are not comfortable dealing with the press, contact your press office or the BACP media team for advice. It might be that media training could help if you have confidence issues; or your press office could help you find a colleague who is happy to talk to the media, or field the press attention themselves. For larger counselling services it might be appropriate to have a nominated spokesperson and even a media protocol. Protocols can help in difficult situations, and even if the eventuality is unlikely it is wise to plan what your team would do if faced with potentially negative coverage.

It can be very difficult to decline the opportunity to speak out on a poignant issue but the fact that counselling itself is non-judgmental and non-partisan should be the basic premise upon which all media relations are conducted.

If you feel you must speak out about a potentially emotive issue then always let your senior management team know what you plan to say in advance and ask a trusted colleague to run through the issues with you. Once again, if you have personal doubts, listen to these. It is helpful to double check with colleagues information that is being given to the press, especially if the information is financial or has a legal implication. If a newspaper prints incorrect information about your service, this could seriously undermine your work and lead to complaints from colleagues and clients. For instance, once a piece of misinformation appears on a website it will appear elsewhere and become virtually impossible to eradicate.

Some issues or programmes may be identified as no-go areas in advance. BACP has an embargo on certain 'reality' programmes and when asked to participate in the conceiving or making of these programmes we decline our involvement.

If you have spoken to a journalist let your press office know how the interview went, as there may be a follow-up story and the press officers can check the coverage received and report back. Always keep notes of names, phone numbers and email addresses.

If you are actively seeking publicity via media coverage contact the press officer at your organisation, let them know and ask if they are able to help. It is likely that they will have contacts in the media who will be interested in counselling and healthcare-related subjects. If the press can work a story around your news – for instance if a service is opening for longer due to increased demand – then you will get media coverage. Such coverage can help promote conferences, events, or counselling services in general, and the cost in time is small in terms of the publicity achieved.

The BACP media team are always happy to give advice about interviews and press enquiries or to talk about media strategy in general. Please feel free to pick up the phone (tel 0870 443 5243) or email us at: [pressoffice@bacp.co.uk](mailto:pressoffice@bacp.co.uk) ■

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