

# The Speakers Bureau: a voice in the media



## Ben Furner

The Shift Speakers Bureau is a volunteer databank of around 40 people with mental health conditions or carers who can provide interviews and talk to the media about issues related to living with mental distress. The Bureau aims to increase understanding around mental health and to reduce stigma and discrimination. Training is provided to all speakers as well as preparation for the fact that the media may not take a positive slant. Speakers have built up their own links with local media and, for some, the Bureau has become an important part of their well-being strategy.

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*“Being heard is fundamental to any group of people achieving equality and a fair deal.”*

**B**eing heard is fundamental to any group of people achieving equality and a fair deal. Although the stigma and discrimination experienced by people with mental health problems has undoubtedly declined in recent decades, the struggle to raise awareness and combat damaging myths is likely to be a long one.

The Shift Speakers Bureau is managed by the charity Mental Health Media. It is a volunteer databank of around 40 people with mental health conditions or carers ready to talk, both to the media and at conferences, in an effort to inform and influence and help to increase understanding around living with mental distress.

Established in 2006, the Bureau is part of the Shift campaign, funded by the Department of Health, which aims to tackle stigma and discrimination around mental health. The Bureau typically arranges a combination of around 10 media interviews or conference presentations a month.

Although the primary goal is to reduce stigma and discrimination, the Bureau is often busy when other less obvious issues – such as the benefits system or the effectiveness of medication for mental health conditions – are in the news. Any comment or speech on issues such as medication or benefits by a person with mental distress presents those with mental health conditions as real people, which in itself helps to fight stigma and discrimination.

For speakers, the motivation is combating ignorance, rather than financial. They are not paid a fee for media interviews, although those speaking at an event are offered a payment on top of their expenses.

When the Bureau was established, a protocol was drawn up which covered issues such as the recruitment of speakers and how they are trained and supported. On joining the bureau, a new member completes a questionnaire, which is then stored on a database. From the information provided at this stage, we



Emma Lindley is a member of the Bureau

The speed with which so much of the 21st century media world moves creates additional pressures. Journalists must produce copy or footage quickly and the news agenda moves at a sometimes bewildering pace. We remain clear, however, that when the bureau was set up, the priority was not to service journalistic needs. Our first priority must be to ensure that our speakers are ok – our protocol states that ‘no speaker will be pressured into accepting any speaking request’.

Emma Lindley, who is currently studying for a PhD on the issue of mental health discrimination, is a member of the Bureau. She welcomes the myth-busting element of her involvement with the Bureau:

*‘I really enjoy it – it’s very stimulating – and I’m actively contributing to a culture demanding fairness.’*

prepare a one-page synopsis of the speaker’s history and experiences (checked by the speaker) to send to journalists. If the journalist is interested in the profile we start the crucial work of supporting the speaker. This includes discussing just what issues and questions the speaker is ready to tackle and whether they are willing to be photographed, named or even interviewed live on national television.

It is about preparing them for the vagaries and realities of talking to a journalist. Each interview or conference appearance is also followed by a debriefing. Inevitably, speakers vary widely in confidence and their willingness to be identified. This means that the level of support required by speakers varies; it can also vary at different times for the same person, depending on their circumstances. Some people are fine to do a live national TV interview, while others feel more at home speaking to a specialist newsletter.

The initial day’s training provided to all new speakers includes media training, which ranges from an overview of how the media works to advice on getting key messages and positive slants across effectively. Despite the preparation, there is always the risk that the resulting media coverage might not be as positive, balanced or understanding as we had hoped. For example, last year we had a real issue with the way a woman’s magazine presented the story of one of our best and most experienced speakers. Fortunately, the speaker accepted that the interview would be an experiment and we had talked through the risks.

Around 70% of the ‘serious’ requests reaching the bureau end up with a speaker doing an interview or speaking at a conference. The bureau also receives around 50 calls a month where we are simply unable to help – for example, requests for interviews with children or young people.

Just as our speakers have a range of conditions, from bipolar disorder to schizophrenia and eating disorders, their availability also varies. Many have jobs, which makes it more difficult to contact them at short notice. Others have almost turned their Bureau work into a full-time (if largely unpaid) occupation.

A notable example here is Paul Davison, one of several members to develop their own links with their local media. Paul speaks to journalists regularly, on both local and national issues, and has done interviews for national television and radio, websites and newspapers and radio in the Newcastle area. Paul feels the Bureau’s work is incredibly important:

*‘It offers a unique opportunity to educate the media, employers, and the wider public on stigma and discrimination and how that can affect the individual. We can also highlight how mental distress can affect anybody, but also how this doesn’t have to be a barrier to living a full life. We can all live with it together.’*

For some, the Bureau and the opportunities it presents have become an important part of their well-being strategy. At the other end of the spectrum, others have



Paul Davison with Spencer Tunic

*“We can also highlight how mental distress can affect anybody, but also how this doesn't have to be a barrier to living a full life. We can all live with it together.”*

decided to withdraw from the Bureau because of a change of circumstances, or to keep their involvement in the Bureau to a minimum. This is an inevitable part of managing a pool of volunteers over a period of time, but we are in the process of recruiting some new members, focusing on those from black and minority ethnic communities. This will allow us to service a wider range of requests.

Feedback from journalists and event organisers has been overwhelmingly positive. Jennie Fazey from BBC Documentaries asked us to find her case studies for a documentary on suicide, which went out on BBC One in March 2008. We were able to find her eight people who matched the initial criteria, and one of our speakers was used in the film. She told us:

*‘The people you introduced us to were just fantastic – exactly what we needed.’*

We do ask event organisers to pay speakers as not only does this help their finances, but it emphasises that the speakers are experts and should be treated as such. However, as we are committed to having the voice of

people with mental health conditions heard, we do have a flexible approach to the issue of fees.

The narrow remit of some events makes it difficult for us to always provide an appropriate speaker. Where we have provided speakers they have usually elicited a very positive response. Professor Chris Thompson, in feedback on the contribution made by one of our speakers at an event, described it as *‘electrifying’*.

The contribution of the Bureau and, more importantly, its speakers obviously represents only a small step in the ongoing battle against stigma and discrimination. There is real progress, however, which will be significantly boosted by the £18m Moving People programme, launching formally in the autumn. Bringing together key mental health campaigning organisations including Mind, Rethink, Mental Health Media and the Institute of Psychiatry, and supported through Comic Relief and the Big Lottery Fund, this four-year, England-wide campaign against stigma and discrimination will hopefully have a huge impact.

But we do live in a world where change takes time. In the meantime, our speakers are doing their bit to ensure that issues around stigma and discrimination are kept in the public eye.

**Ben Furner is director of Furner Communications, a communications company specialising in health and social policy issues. Ben is the lead co-ordinator of the Speakers Bureau, supporting Bureau members and fielding queries from the media, on behalf of Mental Health Media.**

**To find out more about the Shift Speakers Bureau, or to find a Bureau member for a conference or event see <http://www.shift.org.uk/media/speakers-bureau.html>**