Review of Mental Illness in the NS Media Completed
Information Release – February 2005

The media's portrayal of mental illness is generally of good quality, however, the portrayal of suicide could be improved, according to a review of the news media in Nova Scotia last year.

These were the major findings of a review conducted jointly by the Department of Health’s Anti-Stigma/Discrimination Working Group, the Promotion, Prevention and Advocacy Working Group, and the Canadian Mental Health Association, Nova Scotia Division.

"Media play an important role in informing public opinion and we wanted to ensure reporting in our province is being done in a sensitive and responsible way," said Health Minister Angus MacIsaac. "While we were generally satisfied with coverage of mental illness, we see an opportunity to provide more support to the media sector in how it reports on mental health issues, specifically the issue of suicide."

The working group will use these findings as its members develop strategies for promotion, prevention and advocacy. Part of this work will include developing a reference guide for writing about mental illness and suicide, and is set to begin in 2005-06.

"Our hope is to work with the media industry, the community, advocacy groups, the health sector, and the provincial government to create guidelines," said Dr. Stephen Kisely, co-chair of the work group.

Jack Langley, a mental health consumer who sits on the Anti-Stigma/Discrimination working group said: "Stigma adds to the burden already felt by people with mental illness. I think the news, television programming, and movies should portray mental illness as being the same as any other illness. Imagine if mental illness is considered in the same way as heart disease, or if people had a true understanding of the pain someone feels when considering suicide. By doing this, we can teach people that it's okay to acknowledge their problems and to ask for help."

In March 2004, the public was asked to assess and submit articles either dealing with mental illness or suicide. The results of the review were based on the completed questionnaires participants submitted with each entry.
The questionnaire related to mental illness asked about inaccurate or sensational headlines, use of outdated, negative or inappropriate language, inaccurate medical terminology, stereotyping, and emphasis on illness.

The second questionnaire asked about the use of the word "suicide" in the headline and story, prominence of the news item, reference to celebrities, use of photo or description of scene, description of method, interviews with bereaved, and if the death was portrayed as being related to mental illness.

Over the review's six-month period, 366 news articles were submitted. Of these, 85 per cent were from newspapers or magazines, and 15 per cent were from radio or television. There were 304 items related to mental illness and 62 items related to suicide.

Some of the results included:

--28 per cent (101/366 items) were free of any inappropriate content;

--72 per cent (203/366) contained some inappropriate content. Outdated, negative or inappropriate language was the primary area of concern for the mental illness category (contained in 40 per cent of these articles). The top areas of concern for the suicide category was the use of inappropriate language (51 per cent), the use of the word suicide in the headline (48 per cent), and a description of the method used in the suicide (42 per cent);

--items covering suicide were three and a half times more likely to contain inappropriate content (55/62 submissions) than were those on mental illness (210/304 submissions);

--print media were twice as likely to contain inappropriate content (232/311) compared to electronic media (33/55)

--31 items (8.5 per cent) included information about mental illness or contact details for mental health support services

Carol Tooton, Executive Director, Canadian Mental Health Association, Nova Scotia Division said she would like to see more information about how to get help.

“Our community has a responsibility to treat those with mental illness with respect and use any tools we have to prevent suicide. We know the media have powerful tools to support these initiatives in a positive way,” said Ms. Tooton.
In his research, Dr. Kisely found that Nova Scotia’s results are similar to those in other jurisdictions where similar reviews took place. “A Calgary initiative found that positive stories about mental illness outnumbered negative ones by a factor of two to one. As well, an Australia review that used a similar checklist found that stories on mental illness were predominantly positive and reports on suicide were generally poor.”

In response to these findings, the Australian Department of Health and Ageing distributed a resource kit for reporting on mental illnesses and portraying suicide to the Australian media. It is called “Achieving the Balance.”

Senator Michael Kirby also addressed the role of the media in helping to form the public’s attitudes and opinions about people with mental illness in his report called “Mental Health, Mental Illness, and Addictions: An Overview of Policies and Program in Canada” (November 2004).