

# VICTIMS AND THE MEDIA: *ADDRESSING THE PROBLEMS*

---

**SANDRA L. BLOOM, M.D.**

**E-MAIL FROM AMERICA. THE PSYCHOTHERAPY REVIEW 1(5): 211-212,  
OCTOBER 1999.**

Perhaps as psychotherapists, we are particularly attuned to the traumatic impact of victimization. Maybe that's why I cringe whenever a reporter shoves a microphone in the face of a grieving family member or grills an obviously injured survivor of the most recent disaster or criminal escapade. Maybe that's why I have to steel myself to watch the evening news and its latest catalogue of human perfidy, betrayal, and violation. Or maybe the media has gone astray, victimizing its audience by disguising sensationalism and voyeurism as honest reporting. There is at least one psychotherapist I know who decided to do something about the problem.

Frank Ochberg is a psychiatrist who is not new to the field of trauma studies. For ten years he served at the National Institutes of Mental Health rising to become the associate director. He then became director of the Michigan Department of Health. In the early 80's he founded the first residential treatment program for victims of violent crime and was instrumental in forming the Michigan Victim Alliance. He is an internationally known expert on hostage negotiations and has advised the FBI, the U.S. Secret Service, the U.S. Air Force, and the National Security Council on crisis management, hostage negotiations, stress reduction, and victim care. In 1991, in collaboration with journalism professor William Coté, he was instrumental in launching a new program at the Michigan State School of Journalism, the "Victims and the Media" program, now directed by Sue Carter, J.D. and partially funded through the Dart Foundation.

In 1994, Ochberg created the Dart Award, funded by the Dart Foundation and administered by the School of Journalism. This is a \$10,000 prize awarded to the best team effort in outstanding newspaper coverage of victims and their experiences. The entries are judged on which one best illustrates the effects of violence on victims and how they cope with emotional trauma. The panel of

judges is constituted of a member of the Michigan Victim Alliance, three journalists, and the President-elect of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies. The 1994 winner was a paper in Anchorage, Alaska which did an account of how three incest survivors learned to cope in their adult lives. A newspaper in Austin, Texas won the prize in 1995 for a story about a man whose wife and child were killed in an arson fire that left him permanently disfigured. The *Daily Oklahoman* team won the 1996 award for their extensive and poignant coverage of the aftermath of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. In 1997, the winner is a Long Beach, California paper whose news team followed the path of a 22-cent bullet in the fatal shooting of a 17-year-old boy. The series demonstrated the exorbitant price paid by victims, their families, and the broader community for handgun violence.

The Victims and the Media Program at the School of Journalism is a very direct attempt to teach young journalists the skills required to approach and interview victims and to enhance their understanding of the effects of violence on victims. Interactive classroom sessions are held with students using actual victim volunteers recruited from the Michigan Victim Alliance. Seminars and workshops are offered on and off-campus and include debriefing sessions for journalists who have been victimized by what they have seen, such as coping with the emotional aftermath of covering a fire in which children had been killed. The program has produced a series of four instructional videotapes specially designed for journalists, "Covering a Rape Victim", "Covering a Murder Victim's Family", "Covering Gulf War Refugees". Frank Ochberg, M.D. On Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder". The program publishes a quarterly newsletter, holds an annual awards dinner for the Dart Award presentation, and has established a site on the Internet. Dr. Ochberg has also written "A Primer on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder for Journalists". Some of the basic tips offered to journalists who are interviewing victims sound similar to some good rules for psychotherapy: grant the victim a sense of power and control; take care with first impressions; discuss ground rules up front; prepare for the possibility that you will be the first to deliver the bad news; ask permission; watch what you say; avoid the banal; be accurate above all; be especially sensitive to imputations of blame; be alert to the special impact of photos, graphics and overall presentation (Coté and Bucqueroux 1996).

## REFERENCES

- Coté, W. and B. Bucqueroux, 1996. Tips on interviewing victims. *Nieman Reports* L(3):27.
- Ochberg, F. 1996. A primer on covering victims. *Nieman Reports* L(3): 21-26.

Ochberg, F.M. 1988. *Post-Traumatic Therapy And Victims Of Violence*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Republished by permission: The Psychotherapy Review, Ian G. Jones-Healey Editor, PO Box 14 Teddington TW11 8YY UK