



Skills for CHC Chairs

Unit 6: Working with the media

HOW TO
USE THIS
UNIT

You will need:
* the Chair's Resource Pack
* pen and paper

You should set aside half an hour to an hour to work through this unit. [If it takes you more or less than that, it doesn't matter, as long as you feel you've given enough thought to the ideas].

Much of the unit, like the role of the Chair, is about complex situations, which do not have simple yes/no answers. Reflecting on these situations, and deciding how you would behave, is the most important part of the learning.

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1. CHCs and the media

In the course of next week:

A photographer and a reporter from the local paper come to the school where you're running an education project

The Today Programme wants you to comment on a local case that's hit the headlines

You want to publicise the CHC's opposition to proposed changes in Accident & Emergency services

A researcher for a TV documentary wants to contact people who've been struck off GPs' lists

CHCs need the media. Like it or not, we get most of our information about the world from them. So do the people we want to influence - health service officials as well as members of the public.

Journalists and broadcasters also need the CHC: or rather, they need sources of news stories. If this mutual dependence is acknowledged, you may get to a productive working relationship. This unit looks at some ways of getting there.

There are many good courses on handling TV and radio interviews. If you want to see or hear how you come over, and practice techniques, a course can be invaluable. This unit can't do all of that. It aims to help you think through some of the policy and practical issues involved for you as Chair.

SCENARIO
part I

the CHC is running a campaign about the lack of NHS dentists in the area. The Chief Officer has written a press release to go to the two local papers, local radio, and the nearest TV station.

What planning do you and the Chief Officer need to do, before the press release goes out?

NOTE
DOWN

your ideas

1.

2.

3.

4.

NOW
CHECK

your answers against ours.

You need to make some decisions:

1. Is it for immediate release? or embargoed till a specific time and date?
2. Who's going to deal with the phone calls? Remember they may well come in after office hours. One of you will have to be available.
3. If other CHC members are approached for comments, do they respond? or refer the reporter back to one of you?
4. Journalists will want specific cases. Have you contacted people, and made sure they're willing to be interviewed? Can you contact them quickly?

Media policy

You will find early on that you need a CHC policy for dealing with the media. In particular:

- * The division of labour between you and the Chief Officer. Does one of you handle all media enquiries? Do you split it between you? This is a matter of practicality and personal skill, as much as principle.

- * Can members go directly to the press on CHC issues, or should any contact be cleared through you or the Chief Officer? Most CHCs feel it's tactically better to have press work co-ordinated in some way.

- * What do you do when journalists want to talk to complainants? [We deal with this in more detail on page 5]

- * Are there some papers you avoid? This decision may result from grim experience, or forethought.

'Real people'

IMAGINE

at home, you have a problem with a builder, and you go to the consumer aid centre for help. You feel the builder has been dishonest, and you're very angry. You also feel rather foolish, for paying out so much money. It takes a long time, but the consumer aid centre helps you with your case, and it ends satisfactorily.

A year later, someone from the consumer aid centre rings you. He says that the builder has been sued successfully by a group of customers. The local paper is now looking for more people who had problems with that firm, to be interviewed for this week's edition. The adviser says he doesn't want to pressurise you into agreeing, but that it might help their long-term campaign about crooked builders.

How do you feel?

LIST

all your reactions [even if you think they're unreasonable]

SOME
IDEAS

- * under pressure [even though the man says you aren't]
- * still angry with the builder
- * doubtful: do you want your neighbours to know how stupid you were?
- * anxious, in case he gets back at you
- * worried what the paper will do with the story
- * wanting to protect your family from publicity
- * determined to see justice done, and pleased that it has been so far
- * that it's all a long time ago, and you don't need to revive it
- * annoyed that you haven't got time to think about it
- * that the consumer aid centre have been very helpful, so maybe you ought to agree, to help them

Of course people react differently.

This is a dilemma for any organisation that helps individuals: how do you involve the media in your campaigns, without risking exploiting your clients? A story in the local paper may die down quickly. One that gets into the national press or on television can have more damaging effects on people's lives. CHC staff who deal with individual complaints have a responsibility to explain the possible consequences of media coverage. A number of CHCs deal with some of the difficulties by discussing the issue with all complainants, and asking them to decide in principle whether they are willing to be interviewed.

READ

the Media File form
in your Resource Pack

2. Using the media successfully

SCENARIO
cont.

You have sent out your press release on NHS dentists. The local radio station rings up, and you arrange to give an interview the next afternoon.

The CHC has been working on this issue for over a year, and you are very familiar with it. You have figures for the number of dentists who've changed from NHS to private; the number who are no longer taking new NHS patients, or only in restricted categories, such as children; examples of people who've been charged huge amounts for private work; stories of people who couldn't afford essential treatment, and so on. You feel very strongly about the issue.

You're going to be interviewed live in the studio, and you're told you will have about three minutes.

What are you going to say?

NOTE

the points you want to make

ANSWER

For this exercise, it doesn't matter which points you choose: only that there should be few of them. An old piece of advice is to make three points, and say them each three times in different ways.

When you're very close to an issue, it can be difficult to limit yourself like this: but it is essential. In three minutes you can't convey all your accumulated knowledge. You need to think yourself into the position of an 'average' listener - fairly concerned, with no professional knowledge, and probably doing something else while they listen. A few straightforward points, vividly illustrated, will convince them much better than a detailed discussion.

You will probably be told in advance what questions they'll ask. You can also say that you want to be asked about certain angles: this helps your interviewer as well as you. Be aware though that you may also get an unscheduled 'trick' question. Think in advance what this might be - in this example, perhaps something like: 'So the CHC is saying all dentists are unscrupulous and greedy.'

GO
OVER

your answers on page 7, and see if you want to adjust them. Then think up a response for the trick question above.

HOMEWORK

Listen closely to the next politician you hear interviewed, and see how s/he handles it.

Some hints from CHC Chairs and Chief Officers:

"I've learned to assume that everything I say to a journalist may be used. Mostly they respect it if you say something's 'off the record'; but once I did that, and the comment still got reported. Now I don't say anything I don't want in print: it's easier."

"It's great when you can build up a relationship with a journalist who's really interested. You provide them with good reliable material, and they help you campaign. Someone like this will take the trouble to understand the issues. But it doesn't always happen: you have to work at it."

"One problem is that you get obsessed with your subject, and you forget it isn't that exciting for the rest of the world. You have to put yourself in the journalist's shoes, and see what they want: simple human stories, mainly."

"At the beginning I thought I could just use the local paper to get what I wanted across. It's not like that. You show a reporter a story, but then it's theirs, not yours, and they may have a different perspective on it. It's no use getting angry: the two of you are doing different jobs with different values, that's all."

... and from a journalist:

"Many people feel free to be incredibly rude to us. They start off assuming we're all corrupt and aggressive. If I ring up and someone's hostile before we start, I know I'll have a hard time. People get defensive, and then they don't come over well. I know they're not doing themselves justice, but I've still got to get my story in on time.

"Sometimes someone gets annoyed because I've changed a word here and there; but that's my job. Having said that, I do think it's important to complain if there's a serious distortion. Ask for a correction, as soon as possible: and if necessary go to the Press Complaints Commission. Only give us a chance first."

3. Some dilemmas

I: Myra Tutton is a CHC member, and a local councillor. She's chair of the Social Services committee.

The CHC has a debate about the local hospital's discharge policy. It's clear that seriously ill people are being sent home without an assessment of their immediate needs.

Someone puts a motion which is critical of both the hospital and social services. Myra proposes an amendment to delete 'social services', but it's not seconded. The motion is carried, and Myra walks out.

That week, the local paper has a front-page story: 'Health watchdog aims to destroy community care.' Myra's name doesn't appear, but 'a source in the CHC' is mentioned.

What do you do?

COMPARE

your ideas with ours

ANSWERS

1. You need to limit the damage, as soon as possible. This probably means talking to the editor. Did the paper have a reporter at the CHC meeting? What evidence do they have for their assertion? Why did they go on Myra's word, rather than checking the facts with the CHC? You seem to be in a strong position to demand a retraction. You may also want to take advice about going to the Press Complaints Commission. [You and the Chief Officer would need to decide which of you takes this action].
2. Myra isn't observing the 'corporate responsibility' you expect of CHC members. She's confused her two roles, and she's taken damaging action because the decision of the CHC went against her. As well as speaking to her, you may want to ensure other people understand that they share responsibility as members. You may also want to review your media policy [see page 4]

II. Arnold Berg is Chair of the CHC, and a psychotherapist in private practice. He does some work with a local therapeutic community, and has strong views about the NHS' treatment of psychotic patients.

A former patient of the local psychiatric hospital is convicted of attacking someone in the street. The media are full of calls for the re-opening of long-stay hospitals and locked wards, complaints about the inadequacy of social workers, suggestions of electronic tagging and so on. In the middle of this, Arnold, in his role as CHC Chair, is invited to take part in a televised debate.

The CHC's general position is that psychotic patients aren't getting adequate care, but that long-stay hospitals aren't the answer. Arnold agrees with this, but also feels passionately that the NHS fails people with psychosis, that available treatment consists almost entirely of medication, and that alternatives are not considered. He also feels that social work support, despite the Community Care Act, is effectively unavailable.

Arnold wants to take part in the programme, but he's worried. He's done similar programmes before, and knows he can be eloquent and persuasive. He also knows how easy it is to say more than you mean to, in the heat of discussion. He's afraid of compromising the CHC by launching into his own views.

What should he do?

COMPARE

your ideas with ours

ANSWERS

1. He needs to be very clear about the CHC's position. Has care of psychotic patients been discussed in depth? There may be more detail in the minutes. It's worth his talking this through with the Chief Officer, and establishing how far his own views and the CHC's coincide. The more safe common ground there is, the easier.
2. He also need to decide whether it's in the CHC's interests, as well as his own, for him to take part in the programme. Again, the Chief Officer is the right person to discuss this with.
3. If he takes part, he can state at the beginning that he has two roles, which aren't in conflict: and that the CHC discussion so far has been limited to certain aspects. Then he can make it clear during the discussion when he's speaking for himself, and when for the CHC. He'll have to judge whether he can keep to that arrangement, under pressure.
4. If he anticipates complaints after the programme, he could get it video'd, so that the CHC can demonstrate that he's distinguished between his two roles.

IF YOU
WANT

more practice in dealing with the media, talk to the Chief Officer about courses in your area.