

Changing Faces' voluntary code of practice for journalists

CHANGING FACES' VOLUNTARY CODE OF PRACTICE FOR JOURNALISTS

Guidelines for journalists on reporting the experiences of people with disfigurements in the media

1. Your responsibilities as a journalist

Changing Faces' Guidelines for journalists and editors have been developed to help you ensure that your articles and programmes on disfigurement are factual, unbiased and non-prejudicial.

There is a fine line between sensitive, intelligent reporting and sensationalising the issue. The focus should be on informing the public in a balanced and accurate way. Important guiding principles to remember are:

1. Over 1 million of your potential viewers, readers and listeners have disfigurements and in a year, 415,000 people are born with or acquire a disfiguring condition to their face, hands and body.
2. What people say, write and think about people with disfigurements can affect how they are treated and influence their own beliefs about their lives and future.
3. Disfigurement can affect anyone, at any time, of any age and any background. People with disfigurements aren't "someone else" – they could be you, a friend, a relative, a colleague.

A public attitudes survey conducted in January 2008 by Cog Research for *Changing Faces* shows that 9 out of 10 people already have negative attitudes towards people with disfigurements and therefore it is important that your programme or article doesn't create further negativity around the issue. As a journalist, you already have a professional responsibility to ensure accuracy, privacy and non-prejudicial reporting. Existing professional codes of conduct require you to report disability issues fairly (disfigurement is included as a disability in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995).

The Press Complaints Commission's Code of Practice

Clause 12 about discrimination states that the press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to a person's race, colour, religion, sex or sexual orientation, or to any physical or mental illness or disability. Details of an individual's physical illness or disability must be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story. For the full code visit:

www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html

The National Union of Journalists' Code of Conduct

The code requires members to produce no material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation. For the full code visit

www.nuj.org.uk

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OFCOM Broadcasting Code

"In applying generally accepted standards broadcasters must ensure that material which may cause offence is justified by the context...Such material may include, but is not limited to offensive language, violence, sex, sexual violence, humiliation, distress, violation of human dignity, discriminatory treatment or language (for example, on the grounds of age, disability, gender, race, religion, beliefs and sexual orientation). Appropriate information should also be broadcast where it would assist in avoiding or minimising offence." For the full code visit www.ofcom.org.uk

2. Words matter: get the language right

People with disfigurements often face discrimination at school, work, and in other areas of their lives. Media coverage has a significant impact on public opinion. Words frame the way we think about a subject. Journalists, advertisers, campaigners, politicians and others all use words selectively to promote a message, to get people to join a campaign, to entice consumers to buy a product, or to encourage people to see things in a particular way. So, in a similar way, vocabulary can help or hinder a person with a disfigurement.

The language around disfigurement is often negative. Consider the two sentences:

- Joshua is horribly disfigured
- Joshua was facially scarred in a motorbike accident.

In the first sentence, Joshua's disfigurement is labelled as horrible. The second sentence is better because it is more factual and non-judgmental. Imagine using the word "horrible" to describe the colour of someone's skin or their race. It would cause offence yet people readily use words such as grotesque, terrible, monstrous when describing people with disfigurements.

Whether you're a print, magazine or broadcast journalist, by using the right words you can help to change public attitudes and negative beliefs about disfigurement and enable those who experience it to feel a part of society rather than apart from it.

Below are some recommended dos and don'ts to help you do this:

Don't use...	Do use...	Because...
Facial deformity Facial abnormality Facial defect	Facial disfigurement	Disfigurement is more positive and has less of a sense of something being "medically wrong" with the person
Disfigured people Scarred people	People who have disfigurements; or people living with a disfigurement, person with a disfigurement	This respects the person first, rather than labelling them by their disfigurement
Victim of... Suffering from... (e.g.: burns victim; suffers from Apert Syndrome)	Survivor (e.g.: burns survivor) He has Apert Syndrome	The words in the second column are more empowering and factual

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<p>Terribly scarred Horribly disfigured Monstrous Grotesque Ugly</p>	<p>She was scarred She was disfigured</p>	<p>The use of adverbs like those used in the first column describe disfigurement/scars in a negative way; whereas the statements in the second column are factual.</p>
<p>Sentences like: "It's the inside that counts" when referring to someone's appearance</p>	<p>Use words to respect the fact that the person's disfigurement is a valued part of his/her identity e.g. "Keira has a strawberry birthmark on her left cheek, bright blue eyes and a great smile."</p>	<p>Statements as in the first column suggest that a person's external appearance is unacceptable, rather than something that is to be valued as an essential part of them. Just because someone has a disfigurement, it does not mean that a person cannot take pride in their appearance or like their physical image.</p>

3. Why and when to use the word 'disfigurement'

Not everyone likes the word *disfigurement*. Some people prefer words like "visible difference" or "unusual appearance" when talking of their personal experience.

Changing Faces uses the word *disfigurement* as it is a succinct, general term widely understood by the general public that is enshrined in British law in the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995. This Act legally protects people "with severe disfigurements" from discrimination in the workplace and at school.

Where possible we encourage the real cause of a person's disfigurement to be spelled out (e.g. "a person with/who has a Bell's Palsy, cleft lip, burn injuries, cancer, acne etc") because this in an informative way of describing the person's medical condition.

4. Debunk the myths

There are many myths about disfigurement that stereotype people with disfigurements and influence the way that they are treated. As a journalist, it is important that you stick to facts and don't perpetuate these myths in your coverage of disfigurement.

Here are some of the key myths and the facts:

The myth that you cannot lead a successful life with a disfigurement.

This isn't true. Many people with disfigurements live normal and successful lives, although public attitudes and discrimination can make it extremely hard for them to do so.

The myth that surgery is a magic cure. Contrary to popular opinion although surgery can reduce the conspicuousness of disfigurement it cannot remove it completely. If you

Changing Faces' voluntary code of practice for journalists

believe the myth of surgery, you may imagine that someone with a disfigurement is going to get "it" fixed as soon as possible – and even expect them to do so – putting unwanted and unrealistic pressure on them. It is important to not over-estimate what surgery can do or believe it is always necessary.

The myth that people with disfigurements are not interested in their appearance.

It is myth to assume that appearances don't matter to people with disfigurements and they are not interested in looking good. People with disfigurements enjoy wearing make-up, jewellery and fashionable clothes to positively enhance their appearance. They know appearances matter – in the first few minutes at least. Initial judgements are made in the first few minutes of a meeting and being well presented can send out a positive message.

The myth of horror

Because media and film often portray villains and evil characters as having some form of disfigurement people can be afraid of people with disfigurements and equate them with nastiness. Disfigurement has no influence whatsoever on moral character.

The myth of learning difficulties

People with disfigurements often report that people talk down to them, speak very slowly or ignore them altogether. This behaviour reflects a belief that disfigurement is a visible manifestation of some form of learning difficulty. It is a false assumption to generally associate disfigurement with learning difficulties.

5. A picture tells a story

One of the most common misconceptions is that people with disfigurements are destined to tragic, isolated lives. Photographs of lonely, sad people can perpetuate this myth and create hopelessness about disfigurement in the reader/viewer/listener. In documentaries, sad music and dark and sombre lighting can create a mood of despair.

When presenting disfigurement don't fall into the trap of equating disfigurement with tragedy in your films and photographs and spread hope instead of negativity.

Below are some recommended dos and don'ts to help you do this:

Do...	Don't...
Show photographs of people with disfigurements at work, at play, with their families, children	Use dark, tragic, isolated images
Use upbeat music in your films and show people interacting	Use sad music and just individual interviews to camera
Consult with your interviewee about how they want to be filmed/photographed	Base your film/photographs on your assumptions about disfigurement

Contact our Campaigns and Communications Team to find out more.
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