

A STUDY OF NEWS RELEASE PRACTICES
BY STATE MENTAL HOSPITALS AND GUIDANCE CENTERS OF KANSAS

by 4589

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INTRODUCTION

A powerful influence on what the general public feels and believes is commonly thought to be exerted by the media of mass communications. ¹ Because the mass media are concerned with relating information to the public and are a means through which opinions and attitudes are formed, the use of the media is imperative to the acceptance of the policies and goals of mental health facilities; especially with regard to the acceptance of mental patients in the community.

A study of popular conceptions about mental health, conducted in 1959, reflects the results of several studies in this area. It found that "the average man is not misinformed about mental health, rather he is uninformed," and that laymen and the general medical practitioner tend to regard the mentally ill as dangerous, unintelligent, and unpredictable. ² The media of newspapers and radio and television stations can be used to help remedy those conditions.

The field of mental health information as an organized attempt ³ to provide the media with a regular flow of news items is quite new. However, news of psychiatry and mental illness began appearing in the American press in the latter part of the last century in the form of ⁴ exposes. Reinforcing a theme frequently sounded, Everette E. Dennis, director of the Mental Health Mass Communications Program at Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, wrote in a report concerning the development of a regional mental health information-education program in Illinois that one of the goals of a public information office should be to encourage a continuing effort to initiate news and information about mental health

facilities for the news media, specialized publications and other channels of communication.⁵

The following study examined the development and dissemination of news releases to the mass media by three state mental hospitals and nineteen of the twenty-five guidance centers in Kansas as well as an assessment of mass media usage of the news releases.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to: (1) report on the current public information programs conducted by the state mental hospitals and guidance centers in Kansas through the use of news releases to the mass media; (2) determine which media in particular geographic locations received the news releases; (3) obtain an assessment from the mental hospitals and guidance centers of Kansas of their ability to get the mass media to use the news releases; (4) determine whether or not the mental hospitals and guidance centers had a policy established pertaining to news releases of untoward incidents such as riotous conduct, accidents, fires, patients leaving without permission, patient deaths, and other unfortunate incidents, and (5) solicit additional comments from the mental hospitals and guidance centers concerning their news releases and usage.

The relevance of this study to the field of journalism lies in the fact that the dissemination of information by news releases from state mental hospitals and guidance centers to the mass media is inherent in the total process of mass communications. More specifically, the author was concerned with the dissemination of news releases of mental health information. The gathering, writing, distributing, and reporting of information are functions of mass communication.

It is believed that the accumulation of such knowledge would be