

## **THE PATIENT-PRODUCED NEWSPAPER AS THERAPY**

*by Helen Kitchen Branson*

**Creative Forecasting, Be Our Guest – February, 2001**

Who wouldn't like to have his writing appear in the newspaper? Most people like to think of themselves as having something important to say and will respond eagerly to an invitation to have their ideas published. Furthermore, they are more apt to read the paper if they think their names will appear in it. (At least this was my experience when I worked part-time on the psychiatric unit at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Boise, Idaho. One of my duties was supervising the production of a unit-produced newspaper.) With today's computers and their desktop publishing abilities, the Activity Director could easily offer this same activity to his residents.

The longer the patients worked on the newspaper, the more enthusiastic they became. It was not long until they designated themselves according to the jobs required such as editor, page formatter, typist, and reporter. Many of these people increased their self-esteem as well as their skills in expressing their ideas.

### **HOW TO BEGIN**

The first thing to do is to gauge the administration's attitude toward a patient-produced newspaper. Because the unit where I worked cared for mental patients on a temporary basis, I had to consider the attitudes of the psychiatrists and other staff who were involved in the therapeutic plan. (I doubt that attending physicians in a nursing home would have much concern one way or another about a patient newspaper.)

The attitude of the administration, on the other hand, is significant in establishing how much space, if any, can be allowed to express patient ideas and complaints. The person in charge of the newspaper needs to be aware of this consideration, since people often want to express criticism over one thing or another and in a public forum. (It must be the revolutionary in us!) Of course, some complaints were justified, and some were not. We tried to balance the criticism in editorials that conveyed the complaint with an explanation of certain regulations that patients disliked.

This is not a simple matter for the newspaper advisor to control. Patient writers have to be aware of what can be said and what needs to be avoided. Ever the rebels, patients may complain about freedom of the press, which can result in recruitment problems.

Another factor that must be considered before the newspaper begins is the production materials that are available. Does your facility have computers that patients can use? Does it have tape recorders for reporters to use for interviews? Will handwritten manuscripts be considered? What about people who cannot type? Who will do the layout-resident or advisor?

Once all these questions have been answered, it is time to make the first announcement, which can be made by the Activity Director over the public address system. This initial announcement probably won't recruit very many people. For this reason, it is important for the advisor to encourage those who do come to prepare for the first edition. If you have enough material, start with a few pages, a front page, editorial page, and back page.

The resident editor (whether for a specific edition or on a long-term basis) should be chosen according to his interest and ability and never for popularity. (I prefer to choose the person who seems most enthusiastic.) I assign the first stories with the hope of getting a variety of input. One reporter was assigned to do a profile on an interesting patient, and another was assigned to take a picture of the person profiled. Another reporter was asked to write or dictate a front-page story about the conception of the newspaper. Another wrote the *Employee of the Week* column, and the photographer was assigned to take a picture of this person.

Decide how often the newspaper will be published. The people who volunteer should be included in this decision, since they have the responsibility for gathering the material and getting the newspaper out.

The name of the newspaper can be chosen in several different ways. At the VA hospital, we asked for suggestions from the patients in the unit. The newspaper volunteers could also make the decision as a group.

It is important to set deadlines so the editor can devise a method for deciding when he has enough material. The acting editor ideally needs to be a person who can correct grammar and punctuation and write headlines under the supervision of the advisor. (The advisor may have to assume this task for the first few editions until a permanent editor can be found and trained.)

Bylines on stories seem to offer an added opportunity for increasing the reporters' and writers' self-esteem. An alternative is the use of a masthead to list all participants including page formatters, word processors, reporters, editor, etc. A line explaining that the paper is published by the residents (include the name and address of the facility) helps recruit new people as the paper grows. An additional way of giving recognition is by listing the staff on a chart in the room where the newspaper is produced. If the patient population is continually changing, this may not be practical, but it is an excellent way to recognize the newspaper's staff members and encourage participants to seek advancement within the paper.

Since the purpose of a newspaper in the Activity Program is to promote therapeutic participation, these suggestions may violate the general rules of publication. However, my experience has shown that every opportunity for giving individual recognition is a significant factor in a successful patient-produced publication.

There is a temptation for the advisor to follow the lines of least resistance by taking over tasks that seem difficult for the patients to perform. This is a mistake. Unless they are taught, most people will never understand the newspaper staff's duties, and the advisor will be stuck with all the work.

A newspaper is an activity that requires continual work. It shows patients that they have a viable outlet for their ideas. It proves to them that they can have standing among their peers. It can also be a source of learning if the advisor has the willingness to assume a teaching role. It may sound difficult and demanding, but I found it to be a project that provided great personal satisfaction and a way of reaching many people and helping them gain or enhance skills and self-esteem.

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