Sick of getting a bad press

Christopher Humm makes the case for fair and balanced media reporting when the NHS fails to deliver.

During my last holiday, I spent a few days at my local library scanning national newspapers. I also made a point of watching news bulletins as often as possible.

I did not do this because I could not afford to go anywhere. It was because I had a mission. I was searching for something that proved to be elusive - news reports which showed the NHS in a positive light.

I read through newspapers of various political leanings, both tabloid and broadsheet, and watched the television news to saturation point. There were many reports that mentioned the NHS and by far the majority portrayed the service in a negative way.

What's wrong with that, you may ask. After all, there are shortcomings in the NHS and they should be reported. Most of the media do, quite correctly, hold NHS management and the government responsible for such problems.

I also recognise that the NHS and its reforms are a big political issue and give journalists opportunities to comment on apparent government incompetence.

Appear unmoved

But not everybody hears or reads the whole story or is even interested. Often, probably only the headline is noticed. In fact the general public are probably fed up with the never-ending debate on the difficulties that surround the organisation and provision of health care. They are only really concerned when it affects them directly; for example, when their local hospitals are being closed.

So how does this persistent negative media reporting help the cause of the NHS and professions like nursing? Mrs Bottomley and her department certainly appear unmoved by it. It doesn't seem to be stirring senior nurse managers into rebellion mode either.

For those who have little or no contact with the NHS, the possibility of ever being ill and having to enter such an apparently incompetent system probably causes anguish in itself.

Also it can't do much for the morale of staff if their particular establishment is being admonished for some reason, yet they have been working very hard and with a great deal of skill and compassion in difficult circumstances.

I support the freedom of the press to expose inadequacies in any organisation, especially one that is supported by taxation and is run for the benefit of the public. It is the duty of the press accurately to report any shortcomings in a service of such national importance.

What disturbs me is that while these negative headlines are being reported, little mention is made of the good things to be found in the NHS, notably the majority of its employees.

Everyday of the year, throughout every NHS establishment, a vast amount of first class healthcare is being delivered by highly-skilled and dedicated professionals who are working extremely hard.

Being blamed

What effect did the recent banner headline 'The NHS didn't care about my child' have on the general public and on the staff who work in the service? Are all healthcare workers being blamed for that headline?

Journalists from all sections of the media should ensure that when they report on a negative aspect of the NHS they attribute responsibility clearly and correctly. They could then mention something positive. (This does not apply to the nursing press who already know the truth and report accurately.)

If there is a problem with under-resourcing, then say so, but also let it be known that the workforce is performing well under difficult circumstances. It is too easy for journalists just to concentrate on the negative side because that is what makes the more dramatic headline.

The advantage of positive reporting of this type would be three-fold. First, it would reinforce public confidence in the healthcare workforce. It would also boost staff morale and very importantly, it would re-emphasise who is really responsible when shortcomings do occur.

This is an era where there seems to be a continuous stream of criticism directed at the NHS while at the same time client expectations are on the increase. It is important not to allow the good work done by the professions like nursing to be dragged down just because the whole system is seen as failing.

Christopher Humm RGN,BA (Hons), is a night staff nurse.

Incompetence is destroying top hospitals says Blair

Elderly and disabled to bear the brunt of cuts

Health managers lack a sense of balance