

# Guidelines for Journalists on reporting the experiences of people with disfigurements

## 1. Your responsibilities as a journalist

*Changing Faces'* Guidelines for Journalists have been written for journalists, reporters and editors in the press and broadcasting to ensure that your articles and programmes on disfigurement are factual, unbiased and non-prejudicial. We encourage you to use these whenever you are reporting on disfigurement or a disfigurement-related story or issue, and to distribute them as widely as possible to your colleagues.

Every day, people who have disfigurements – and their parents, family and friends – are influenced by what the media says about disfigurement. The media can frame what society thinks about people with disfiguring conditions. Those who contact *Changing Faces* tell us that current depictions of disfigurement in the media can create a distorted, uninformed and negative view of disfigurement – which can lead to prejudice and discrimination.

There is a fine line between sensitive, intelligent reporting and sensationalising the issue and/or making negative value judgements about people's appearance.

Your focus should be on informing the public in a balanced and accurate way. It is important to remember that:

- Disfigurement can affect anyone, at any time, of any age, gender and background – people with disfigurements aren't "someone else" – they could be you, a friend, a relative, a colleague
- Over 1 million of your potential readers in the UK have a significant disfigurement to their face, hands or body from diverse causes – from birth, burns, scarring, cancer surgery, skin and eye conditions, and facial paralysis; 415,000 people acquire a disfigurement in a year – some temporary, some life-threatening
- What the media says, thinks and writes about people with disfigurements and how it portrays them, can affect how they are treated – and can affect their own beliefs about their lives and future.

A public attitudes survey conducted by COG Research in 2008 showed that 9 out of 10 of people found it difficult to associate positive characteristics with people who have facial disfigurements so it is important that your articles/features do not create further negativity around the issue – albeit unintentionally.

As a journalist, you already have a professional responsibility to ensure accuracy, privacy and non-prejudicial reporting. Existing Codes of conduct require you to represent disability issues fairly. Journalists with public service broadcasters also have to show "due regard" to promoting positive attitudes towards people with disabilities as a result of Public Sector Equality Duty which took effect in 2006. Broadcasters must also show due regard to OfCom and other Codes of Practice.

Disfigurement was included as a disability in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and continues to be seen this way under the Equality Act 2010. The requirements of the Act to avoid discrimination therefore apply to those with disfigurements.



## Press Complaints Commission's Code of Practice

Clause 12 of the Editor's Code on discrimination states:

- i) 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.
- ii) Details of an individual's physical or mental illness or disability must be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story.

For the full code visit: <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html>

## 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, race and sexual orientation).

"Factual programmes or items or portrayals of factual matters must not materially mislead the audience...News in whatever form must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality." For the full code go to: [www.ofcom.org.uk](http://www.ofcom.org.uk)

## 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 go to: [www.nuj.org.uk](http://www.nuj.org.uk)

## 2. What does this mean for you?

You should ensure that your coverage relating to disfigurement is fair and balanced by doing the following:

As an individual:

- Make sure you are fully informed about the causes, effects, myths and stereotypes about disfigurement
- Get the language right on disfigurement
- Avoid stereotypical representations which create negativity around the subject.

As a newspaper/broadcaster:

- Use our Guidelines to inform your coverage of disfigurement-related issues.

As an industry:

- Commit to representing your readers who have disfigurements in a fair and balanced way
- Ensure that *Changing Faces'* Guidelines for Journalists are widely available and used throughout the industry.



### 3. What you need to know about disfigurement

#### ***Causes and effects: get the facts right!***

The word "disfigurement" is used to describe the aesthetic effects of a mark, rash, scar or skin graft on a person's skin or lack of symmetry or loss of function or paralysis to their face or body.

Some people are born with disfigurements and have birthmarks or craniofacial conditions (conditions which affect the shape of the head/face); others acquire disfigurements through accidents, fire, violence and war or from cancer and its treatments, eye conditions and facial paralysis like Bell's Palsy or a stroke. Skin conditions such as psoriasis, eczema, vitiligo and acne also cause disfigurement.

Largely as a result of other people's reactions and attitudes, living with a disfigurement can be a major challenge for an individual and their family. People with disfigurements can experience problems in social situations, leading to high levels of social anxiety and depression, lowered self-esteem and confidence and difficulties in finding employment or forming relationships.

As well as facing the challenges of frequent hospital visits, children with disfigurements can be teased, ostracised and bullied, leading to behavioural problems, poor academic performance and difficulties in making friends.

Research and *Changing Faces'* experience confirm that these problems can be mediated/prevented if individuals and their families can:

- Get realistic information about the treatment options available
- Learn how to manage other people's reactions
- Adopt a positive attitude about the future and prospects
- Get quality support from family, friends, teachers, charities and others.

Further information about common disfiguring conditions and their effects are included in the free *Changing Faces* publication: *Facing Changes* – please order as many as you would like to distribute – or can be found on our website [www.changingfaces.org.uk](http://www.changingfaces.org.uk)

#### ***Debunk the myths and stereotypes!***

There are many myths and stereotypes about people with disfigurements that influence the way they are treated and the way they think about themselves. In factual reporting, it is particularly important that you stick to the facts and do not perpetuate myths about the subject. When writing or editing an article or a feature you should avoid using headlines, graphics, vocabulary or portrayals that reinforce these myths.

##### **1. Myth: You cannot lead a successful/fulfilled/happy life with a disfigurement**

This isn't true, and if you believe this myth, you are likely to portray people with disfigurements as sad, tragic figures or bitter and reclusive. Many people with disfigurements lead happy, successful lives although public attitudes and discrimination can make it extremely hard for them to do so.

##### **2. Myth: Surgery is a magic cure/solution to disfigurement**

If you believe this myth, you are likely to portray people as "medical cases" and encourage the view that people with disfigurements should "get it fixed". You may also add to the pressure they may feel to have further surgery." In reality, whilst surgery/



medicine can reduce the visibility of the disfigurement it can rarely remove it completely – and not everyone wants to have further surgery.

### 3. Myth: People with disfigurement are not interested in their appearance

Disfigurement is often associated with ugliness and there is a common misconception that people with disfigurements are not interested in looking good. People with disfigurements enjoy wearing make-up, jewellery and fashionable clothes as much as anyone else, to positively enhance their appearance. They know that appearance matters – in the first few minutes at least when initial judgements are made and so being well presented can send out positive messages.

### 4. Myth: People with disfigurements are nasty, horrific or evil

Because media and film often portray evil characters as having some form of disfigurement and the language around disfigurement is often negative (“scar on the landscape”), people can be afraid of those with disfigurements and equate them with nastiness. Disfigurement has absolutely no influence on moral character.

### 5. Myth: People with disfigurements have 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.

## 4. Words matter: get the language right

People with disfigurements often face discrimination at school, work and 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, politicians and others all use words selectively to promote a message, to get people to join a campaign, to entice customers to buy a product or to encourage people to see things in a particular way. They can also, inadvertently, use vocabulary that can help or hinder a person with a disfigurement.

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

- Joshua was horribly disfigured in a motorbike accident
- Joshua was severely disfigured in a motorbike accident.

In the first sentence, Joshua’s disfigurement is judged to be “horrible”. The second sentence is factual and non-judgemental – and is therefore preferable. Imagine using the word “horrible” to describe the colour of someone’s skin or race. It is offensive, and yet people readily use words like horrible or grotesque when describing disfigurement.

Whether you are a print, magazine or broadcast journalist, by using words with care, you can change public attitudes and negative beliefs about disfigurement and enable those who have them to feel a part of society rather than apart from it. Here are some recommended “do’s” and “don’ts” of language:

Don't use...	Do use...	Because...
deformity abnormality defect	disfigurement	disfigurement is more objective and less about the person having something “medically wrong” with them



Don't use...	Do use...	Because...
disfigured people scarred people	a person who has a disfigurement a person who is living with a disfigurement a person with a disfigurement	putting the person first respects them rather than labelling them by their disfigurement
victim of... burns suffering from... eczema suffers from Apert Syndrome	survivor (burns survivor) he has Apert Syndrome	these words are more empowering and factual
terribly scarred horrifically disfigured badly burned monstrous grotesque	she was scarred she was disfigured	the adverbs in the first column, make value judgements; the statements in the second column are factual
"it's the inside that counts" when referring to somebody's appearance.	"Keira has a strawberry birthmark on her left cheek, bright blue eyes and a great smile."	In the first column suggest the "outside" appearance is unacceptable. Having a disfigurement does not mean that a person cannot take pride in the appearance or like their physical image

### ***When and where 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 appearance. *Changing Faces* uses the word "disfigurement" as it is a succinct generic term, widely understood by the general public that is enshrined in British law in the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 and now in the Equality Act 2010. The Act legally protects people with "severe disfigurements" from discrimination in the workplace and at school.

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

### **5. Watch that title!**

Very good factual and sensitive articles/features on disfigurement are often spoiled by offensive titles – "Face transplant for Elephant Man" - which label a person in the article in a sensationalist way, encourage voyeurism and treat them as objects rather than people. The language used in such titles is often used in the school playground and in the street to taunt, tease and bully people with disfigurements. Contrast that headline with "Harry wouldn't change how he looks!" alongside a picture of a young boy with facial burns. This headline tells you something about Harry himself as person.

Whilst the media in general tends to respect boundaries related to offensive language on issues such as race, this isn't always the case with disfigurement.

## 6. A picture tells a story

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

When presenting disfigurement in your films or photographs, don't fall into the trap of equating it with tragedy and spread hope instead of negativity. Below are some recommended "do's" and "don'ts" to help you do this:

Do	Don't
Show images 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 predominately individual interviews to camera
Consult with your interviewee about how they want to be filmed	Base your film/imagery on your assumptions about disfigurement

For further ideas and information contact our Campaigns and Communications team on 0845 4500 275 or [info@changingfaces.org.uk](mailto:info@changingfaces.org.uk)