

Drug ads still stigmatise mental illness

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(PhysOrg.com) -- The way that drugs used to treat mental illness are advertised to doctors could be helping to perpetuate ? rather than break down ? the stigma still attached to mental health problems.

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Over the space of a year, Dr Juliet Foster analysed 96 different drug advertisements carried in the [British Medical Journal](#) and the [British Journal of Psychiatry](#). She discovered stark differences in the way that psychiatric and non-psychiatric drugs are advertised to health professionals.

Whereas adverts for "physical" diseases such as pain and blood pressure medication usually picture people as happy and active, either in work settings or enjoying their leisure time, psychiatric drugs such as those used to treat depression and Alzheimer's disease are more likely to show troubled or inactive individuals.

According to Dr Foster: "The negative images of distressed, disturbed and often deviant individuals used in advertisements for psychiatric medication contrast sharply with advertisements for non-psychiatric medication which focus on happy smiling people engaged in healthy activity, and perpetuate links between mental health problems and abnormality, fear and otherness."

As well as looking at images, Dr Foster analysed the text used in the drug advertisements. She found that while adverts for non-psychiatric drugs majored on medically-related information on the drug itself, adverts for psychiatric drugs included less text and text that is focussed on narrative description or case studies.

The differences have important implications for the stigma still attached to [mental illness](#), says Dr Foster.

"It is hard to argue that the general public should see mental health problems in the same light as any other health problem when it seems clear that this is not always happening in the health industry," she says.

"It would be wrong to deny that health problems don't cause suffering: people who experience mental health problems obviously do report very high levels of distress and unhappiness at their experiences. But to maintain a distinction between [mental health](#) and other health problems, and in particular to portray mental ill health more in terms of chaos, deviance, fear and otherness risks perpetuating [stigma](#) that professionals, and service users may strive so hard to dismantle in other areas."

The paper is published in the [Journal of Mental Health](#).

Provided by University of Cambridge

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