

ICE WARS

MENTAL HEALTH PATIENT CONSENT PROCESS

Setting out to make a documentary that shows people with mental health issues during acute phases of illness poses obvious challenges. At the outset, our aim in filming people who may be affected by mental illness was to find a methodology to ensure the interests and safety of those involved.

In negotiating access to film inside mental health facilities and to accompany their personnel into the community, we drew on our experience making Changing Minds (Series 1 and 2) for the ABC in 2014 and 2015. For those productions, we were very fortunate in the amount of assistance, support and collaboration we received from our Hospital partners to ensure the consent processes we designed were subject to detailed and rigorous scrutiny. We replicated these access arrangements for Ice Wars.

The protocols we used for Changing Minds and Ice Wars were based around the core practice of participants providing initial consent and then confirming that consent only after being medically assessed to have the capacity to make a final decision on whether they wanted to appear in the series.

This approach was approved by the senior management of all our Hospital partners, including the responsible Area Directors for Mental Health and Chief Executives.

The guidelines we adopted to implement our consent process started at the first contact between our film crew and the mental health patients we were looking to film. No filming took place without the approval of a doctor and no patient was approached to be in the series without agreement from a clinician.

After filming was over, Northern Pictures and its Hospital partners had follow-up meetings with each patient included in the program, to make sure they were still comfortable with their earlier decision to appear. These meetings included the patient and two members of their medical team, one of whom was always a Consultant Psychiatrist. At this time the doctors and other medical team members attending were responsible for assessing the patient's capacity to make their decision and to provide a final and formal informed consent to appear in the program.

At the meetings with patients we described exactly how they would appear in the program, when well and unwell, and who else would speak about them and their illness. A personalised deed of consent and release was drafted for each participant with these descriptions repeated.

This process applied to every single mental health patient identified in the Ice Wars series, whether their story was featured or if they simply appeared in the background. If they did not consent, they were not featured in the series. If they appeared incidentally, they were blurred so their identity was hidden.

During filming, the production crew and clinicians worked collaboratively to make sure the crew's presence did not cause disruption or make patients, those who were being featured and those who were not, feel uncomfortable. Filming did not go ahead if it was considered disruptive or upsetting to anyone at any time.

After filming was complete, at the rough cut stage of post production, Northern Pictures screened all material relating to any of our Hospital partners to members of the Hospital's executive team. At this point any implications or concerns for participants were identified and addressed.

The agreed processes allowed people to withdraw from the series when recovering from the acute phase of their illness and some people did so. This was their right and it was honored. All crew members were contractually bound to maintain people's privacy except to the extent patients consented to their stories being told.

Northern Pictures
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