

“Like Minds, Like Mine”: the campaign against stigma and discrimination (Postscript)

“Mark Burton – Killer at the Zoo”. These headlines, in the nationwide *Sunday Herald* on 25 March 2007, proved a reality check for the Like Minds team as they worked on the fourth series of advertisements designed to reduce stigma and discrimination against people with mental illness.

In 2001, Mark Burton, then 26 and diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, fatally stabbed his mother a day after being discharged from Southland Hospital’s mental health unit, by a doctor later found not competent to practice. Since being found not guilty of murder by reason of insanity he had been in the care of the Mason Clinic in Auckland, which as part of his rehabilitation had got him a job with a company contracted to make compost from the manure, or “zoodoo” produced at Auckland zoo. The zoo was not told of Burton’s history. The job did not bring him in contact with members of the public, but when the zoo found out about him, Burton lost his job.

The Mental Health Commission issued a statement condemning the sensationalist reporting of the story. However, the response by the public, including journalist colleagues, proved to be a powerful demonstration of changing public attitudes.

By 4.00 pm on 26 March, 2007, the *New Zealand Herald’s* “Your Views” pages were running strongly in support of Burton’s right to privacy. Of 26 responses posted, all but five said the zoo was wrong to sack him and many also criticised the reporting of the incident (*Exhibit 1*).

This postscript has been prepared by Janet Tyson for teaching purposes to accompany the cases 2007-73.1 and 73.2. The use of teaching materials is restricted to authorised persons.

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The New Zealand Herald

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Your Views Story

Your Views: Should Mark Burton work at the zoo?

4:00PM Monday March 26, 2007

What do you think? Send us your views >> [Read the story](#)

Mental health authorities had arranged for psychiatric patient Mark Burton, who stabbed his mother to death six years ago, to work at Auckland zoo on three mornings a week as part of his preparation for discharge into the community.

The zoo has now terminated his employment.

Here is the latest selection of your views:

Mike Adams

If the authorities have judged, and have confidence in their judgement, that Mark is now well enough to interact with the community, surely it does not matter where he works. He is either well enough to be out, or not! It seems he loves animals and will be more inclined to reintegrate if he has a stable job he likes. We cannot continue to punish someone for being sick at one point in their life.

Maureen Mildon

As long as Mark Burton was being adequately supervised and is in recovery and receiving the best possible medical treatment there is no reason why he could not be working on the Zoopoo project. It is not that he is showing children around the petting zoo. Some would have him still locked up in an institution, but with the right treatment and support he should be able to lead a good life, in spite of his illness.

David

I think that Mark should be able to work at the zoo. I realise he has done some things in the past that he would regret doing. By rights he should have support around him and be allowed to do his job. What is the difference between what he has done and is doing now and somebody released from prison after completing his time for what he has done? I guess the question you should be asking yourself is that media plays a big role in our life. It can be positive and negative and in this case it is negative. John Kirwan is doing a great job in promoting that people with depression can have a normal life and can seek help to overcome their depression. You wouldn't like people to run your paper down if they did something negative towards the readers so come on and turn it into a positive story. Yes, he should still be allowed his job as he is trying to prove to people he can do things in the community.

Im

To the person who said that working with people with mental health issues is very stressful and that they may take a lot of time off work and put undue pressure on other staff, bear in mind that Mark Burton's job was not in a highly pressured and sophisticated environment with a lot of interdependencies. He was doing the very basic task-focused job of shovelling poo. I would like to give credit to Wellington's "Trash Palace" recycling centre which employs people with mental health issues with marvellous results - they provide some of the best customer service I have experienced.

Warwick Cutfield

Sadly paranoid schizophrenia is not something that suddenly gets better, usually this is a

Your Views

What is your most hated song?

What city should have the Ellerslie flower show?

permanent illness. Various drugs are used to control the patient and type and quantity is different for each patient. The sickness in this case is usually permanent and if he stops taking his medication his behaviour will be totally unpredictable. The mental health act seems to have different trigger points at which people are on voluntary medication and degrees of forced medication. If he is on forced medication then there should be no cause for concern. If he is on voluntary medication then he will most likely relapse and put himself and others in danger.

David Stevens

He may be "rehabilitated", but he took a human life. Is there no long-term price to pay for that? It seems that causing the death of another human being is now a totally diminished crime.

Chontelle

The "know me before you judge me", and the John Kirwan depression adverts are a brilliant step in the right direction towards better understanding and support of people suffering mental illnesses. Having had my own experiences and loved ones with an illness I am pleasantly surprised to see the supportive comments about this situation on "your views." But I don't think I am understanding enough to take my children to the zoo knowing that a man who murdered his mother due to insanity could be in close proximity. A qualified professional got it wrong about Mark Burton and his mother lost her life. Mark and his family have suffering unimaginable to most of us to live with forever as a result. But my safety and my family first. I wouldn't take the risk. I think the zoo was within its rights, and I am saddened that there isn't an obvious place where Mark can go to rehabilitate and work with the support he needs. Don't beat the zoo up about it, perception is a big thing, and our judicial system, mental health system and everything that goes with it are certainly not infallible as has been proven.

Luke Mason

He has obviously been reintroduced gradually back into society and overseen at all times. It is a sad case of mental illness gone wrong. However I can see people's anxieties. Here is a man who killed his own poor mother working at the public zoo with family and children around. Maybe his working life should be limited to non-public work such as a farm instead.

Amanda

How sad for Mark Burton to have been failed so miserably in the past and to now lose his second chance at living a normal life. Give the poor guy a go - he is hardly going to start stabbing people willy-nilly while doing supervised work. He is not a murderer, he is just somebody who needs protection and assistance. I really admire his bravery in seeking work despite the inevitable meanness and discrimination he faces.

Man of Conscience

No. The public's right to safety far outweighs the right to privacy of a convicted murderer. Mark Burton threw away all of his human rights including his right to privacy and to freedom the first time he plunged the knife into his poor mother. We all need to be protected from such people.

Stephen Judd

The zoo was wrong to sack him. Clearly it was a matter of PR perception rather than public safety. However the Herald and TV3 should be ashamed of their role in this. If it were not for the fear of unfavorable news coverage, this would not even be a problem.

Raju

I completely agree with Mark. While we call ourselves a developed country we are even worse in our psyche about mental health issues than third world. My spouse was a bi-polar (still is but has not had an episode for four years) and lost her job in the chemistry line, a profession she loved. We were unaware of what had hit us. We did not manage it properly due to lack of knowledge. Five years down the line after she is maintaining fantastic health, the system still does not want to give her a chance. She is being offered menial jobs such as cleaning tables and labour type employment. She is an MSc in Organic chemistry. I think the lip service provided by the recruitment industry (and society in general) on people with mental illness after they have completely come in control of the demon is appalling. They are the middle people who spoil chances of a healthy person with mental

illness from joining the mainstream. It makes me very angry that people with diabetes, cancer etc are treated so differently to ones who have mental illness. The support to return to meaningful work is totally lacking.

Danielle

If our friend had known his flatmate was a mental health patient being re-integrated into society he would still be alive. Mental health patients do not deserve to be discriminated against but members of the public dont deserve to be murdered because they dont know that the person they live with need medication to remain "normal". If the patient has the correct out patient care and are monitored to ensure they are taking their medication, I am sure the outcome would be very different – but they are not are they?

Peter Jamieson

Stigma will clearly still continue. The zoo in a normal employment case would need to at least suspend and take time to calmly check out the relevant facts. Mental health raises emotions. For the zoo to say there are better places than a zoo to reintegrate into society I see as laughable. I would have thought the zoo was a great place, perhaps being stuck in a corner in a factory putting thing into thingimes is more what the zoo boss has in mind, says more about the zoo boss to me.

NG

The rednecks have taken over the asylum. I think the question here should not be "Was the zoo right to sack Burton" (they werent) but rather "How irresponsible was the NZ Herald in its handling of this story" (incredibly I think is the answer). Opinion on both criminal behaviour and mental health seems equally divided between a "throw away the key" approach and support for rehabilitation and integration. You can not have it both ways. Unless we are going to lock people away forever (and I do not think anyone with two brain cells would support this approach for someone with a treatable mental illness) then supervised rehabilitation upon completion of sentencing or treatment (and sustained by medical advise) must be the best option. The Herald knows that Burton will be reintegrated into society at some stage (that is the way our law system works, whether you like it or not). Your attempt to name and shame (especially with the cringe headline "Killer at the Zoo") is therefore nothing more than a pitiful attempt to appeal to a rising "Grab you torch and Pitchforks" mentality. Demonstrating that, rather than spending good money actually investigating a real news story, the Herald on Sunday would prefer to invent a little frenzy, stand back, and wait for Auckland necks to turn a lovely shade of crimson.

Gordon Rouse

Dear Society, You are a bleeding hypocrite. Always telling us we should get a respectable job and not to be a burden on society. Treat people with schizophrenia with contempt, then watch them go amuck, and smugly say, " Gee, glad we didnt give them a second chance!" Compassion involves taking a risk sometimes, but the return is generally worth it. People are a product of your expectations or judgements. I for one would be happy to take children to the zoo, knowing that possibly one in ten of the staff have some sort of mental health issue. Even if you restrict the staff to people who have never had mental health issues, then what about the patrons? How do you know none of them are child molesters or worse. Burton might have paranoid schizophrenia, but it seems society has just plain paranoia. If you cant even be a poo shoveller, what hope do we offer for the mentally ill?

Anna

I believe that employers should know the health history of a mental patient. It is stressful working with someone who is dealing with mental health issues. I am currently working with someone who was committed last year with a mental condition and was released and deemed fit to return to work by a doctor. In talking to this person and asking about ongoing care they said that they have not heard from the doctor and is not planning to go back unless someone contacts them. They have already taken over two months off work last year for their mental illness which puts incredible strain on other people in the workplace. I agree that Burton needs to work and learn to function but due to his actions and mental illness, should be away from a public area and supervised.

Chris Barr

Mark has obviously been rehabilitated and having a job is an important part of society. He was not in a situation where he was in regular contact with the public, he was just sweeping animal poo. It is unfair as its not giving him a fair chance to move on and become a decent member of society.

Paula Weir

Absolutely not. He was still in supervised care. It was an absolutely hysterical over reaction, and the media headline "Killer at the zoo" was disgusting. Everyone has the right to be forgiven and start afresh, especially those with mental illness who have the courage and honesty to confront and treat the problems that afflict them. I am deeply saddened for Mr Burton and his father who deserve the chance to heal, as this sort of prejudice will keep the grief of their wife and mothers death raw. Mr Burton is not to be blamed for the way he was years ago as he was receiving poor care and treatment and was incompetently evaluated. Mr Burtons case unfortunately highlights the problems we have in our mental health system with difficulty accessing decent medical care and well trained and empathetic psychologists, counsellors, and psychiatrists. We should be more concerned that psychiatrists are still making mistakes in evaluating mental health patients and making them more susceptible to committing crimes that ruin the lives of their families than we are about the success stories like Mr Burton who has made the commitment to turn his life around.

D

I can understand the uproar of having Mark Burton at the zoo, however what people do not realize is that this particular class of patients are very closely supervised, As far as I am aware, they require patients to demonstrate over a number of months/years appropriate behaviour and insight into their illness, and I guess there may be some people who are not able to do that and will never be released. Release then is a hard won outcome for these patients. Having worked alongside these people at the zoo, I have to say I feel safer in that environment, than when I am in the general public on a Friday night in Auckland. Please give people a chance to recover.

Bazz

Personally I feel the zoo was right to sack him, not only has he killed some one before but also has mental issues with which he could possibly relapse. Dont get me wrong I feel for people who have mental problems, I have friends who do. But do I see it as an excuse to kill? No! Would I risk the possibility that this could happen again and employ someone who has been in this position before, putting not only my staff but customers at possible risk? No way! Employers should be privy to major facts like employing someone who has killed and was not convicted due to mental health issues. The privacy act is hiding the information of criminals and killers behind the mental health legislation and people deserve to know.

Heather

No, they were not right to sack Mark Burton. Patients with "mental health issues" are still the very poorest relations in our health system. It is the least understood and least resourced area of Health Care. Recent campaigns depicting well-known people who have experienced mental health problems have in some way increased awareness but even in the health professions, understanding and acceptance of those with mental illness is negligible. We have been battling the health and education systems for 11 years with our son (now 16) and have found that lack of resource and support for co-ordinated care makes life extremely difficult. Look at the Liam Ashley story.

Tim Spooner

Of course the zoo was right to terminate the employment. This guy killed his own mother. If he gets off his medications again, he could easily kill again. Of even more concern is the fact that the organisation that arranged his employment did not disclose his past to the zoo, giving them the option at the outset to assist or not. Another case of "protecting privacy" at the expense of the rest of us having a right to know.

Kate Danvers

How disappointing to see the angle your paper has chosen to take on the Mark Burton story – the front page screaming hysterically 'Killer at the Zoo'. Reading beyond the headline we learn that this young man, once so appallingly let down by the mental health system, is finally reintegrating into society with appropriate support and assistance in place. How proud he, and his family, must have

been of his employment and how damaging of you to take that away from him with your tabloid style journalism. I hope an employer with more compassion and understanding than zoo management steps up to offer Mark an opportunity to continue his supervised reintegration.

Andrew Ferguson

I think it was incredibly irresponsible of the Herald on Sunday to interfere with Mark Burtons rehabilitation in order to increase circulation of your Sunday tabloid. In the interests of public safety alone, Mr Burton should be allowed an opportunity to win the battle with his illness.

Dick Thompson

Management of NZ public health system strikes again!
ACC bureaucracy reacted as one might expect, albeit failing to consider therapeutic effects of working with "fellow" animals, whilst claiming "responsible" employment did not outweigh political expedience in Burtons case no doubt. Public opinion may seriously doubt the competence of ACC official involvement, in sacking Mark Burton for no justifiable reason, other than fear of adverse publicity. Maybe his "paranoia" might gain more credibility, following circumstances like those reported by the NZ Herald, regardless?