

## Radio – John Morton listens in

## SIGNING OFF

**T**HIS is the last of my discussions of psychology on the air. I have been doing it for a couple of years and felt that I had nothing left to say. Perhaps there was nothing left to talk about. It has been a disturbing two years. I am a radio-ish kind of person like many of you, I guess. I wake up to the *Today* programme, cook with the radio as a background, listen to it in the car. Habitually, my wife and I would mutter to each other 'Could do with a bit of psychological input there' as a story was covered from the economic, forensic, political, social, fashion or retail points of view but ignored the underlying problems. Still, every now and then we would be pleasantly surprised when some intelligent professional comment was included.

When I started looking specifically for psychology programmes I was more disappointed. The main problem seems to be whether the programme maker knows anything about psychology – or, indeed, any science. This is not a new problem, but the absence of the specialist science unit in the BBC has made a big difference. We could always rely on intelligent coverage of psychology in *Science Now* or *Medicine Now* because both presenters and programme makers knew something about the subject matter and were happy with the power of the spoken word. Too often now we have producers who fill the background with music and sound effects that take time and distract.

Going back over the dozen or so columns I have written in this slot, I found a couple of phrases which didn't make it into print at the time that I think worthy of rescuing. The first is the

comment, from a depressed person, that when you cut yourself there is 'a transference of pain from your head to your arm'. The second was on *Today* where a contributor was described as an 'occupational psychologist who believes that governments can be analysed like individual people'.

Finally, letters matter. They mattered to me; thank you all those people who took the time to comment on the column or to



A transference of pain?

point to things I missed. They matter to *The Psychologist* – send in your views on psychology in the media. And they matter to the programme makers, because the standard methods of measuring programme impact are so crude. Write in when you feel a programme is good as well as when you feel it misses the point. Make professional comments and make them in an entertaining way. Also, keep up your relationships with your local radio. At Annual Conference time I am amazed at the appetite of local radio for information about psychology, particularly for the commuter slots. And remember that you have more effective editorial control over a live interview as long as you tell your story and don't get confused by the questions.

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## Television – Nick Neave looks on

## Whatever next?

**Y**OU would have thought that with BBC1's experience generating and resolving cliffhangers in its popular soap *EastEnders*, it could manage to do the same in its science programmes. The aptly titled *A Cruel Inheritance* revealed the devastating onslaught of the degenerative genetic disorder Huntington's chorea on two unfortunate souls. On hand were Anne Rosser and Roger Barker from the MRC Centre for Brain Repair in Cambridge to deliver the brutal facts – progressive deterioration in movement, memory, and personality; no cure on the horizon; and an average life expectancy of 15 years from diagnosis. Along comes Dr Steve Dunnett with a hint of salvation in the form of foetal tissue transplantation, and some impressive results from a case in France. The two



These brains were made from walking?

patients were duly shown being prepared for their controversial treatments, but then nothing! Not a hint of the outcomes. Did it work? What happened to these nice people with whom we had formed a close bond over the previous 40 minutes? Shame on you BBC.

Equally tantalising was ITV's 'Our daughter won't eat' part of their *Real Lives* series. This focused on the story of Vicki, an anorexic 16-year-old who was recently placed under a court order by her parents in order to force-feed her. The rights of the individual were contrasted with the sheer heartache and desperation of the doting parents, and the extent of this cruel disorder was unflinchingly exposed – along with Vicki's rapidly shrinking waistline. We shared

the trauma as she was hospitalised, released, and then re-admitted, with her weight plummeting to four stone. With little 'expert' input this harrowing programme showed the real-life consequences of this puzzling disorder, which has the highest death rate (around 20 per cent) of the psychiatric illnesses. Again, the desire to find out how Vicki and her family manage to cope (or not) was intense and unfulfilled.

A cliffhanger that may never be resolved concerns the thorny question of whether we humans got where we are today by possessing a big brain, or whether big brains

evolved later on as a result of other physical factors. *Horizon* (BBC2) addressed this conundrum in 'The ape that took over the world' in which palaeontologists (like most

academics) argued a lot and never came up with convincing evidence, though the bipedalism first hypothesis seemed to be the most parsimonious.

I missed all but the last two episodes of *Child's World* (Channel 4) and promptly wished that I hadn't. A nice little series that paid less attention to 'experts' arguing and more to actual children in action. Some neat experiments provided the science to go along with the cuteness factor, and the topics were explained with clarity and humour.

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