

Mental illness and mental health

In the December issue of *The Lancet Psychiatry*, Dinesh Bhugra and colleagues¹ share their perception that the use of the term “mental illness” has been phased out during the past 25 years, in favour of less stigmatising terms such as “mental health”. We enjoyed their discussion, and firmly agree that efforts must continue to reduce stigma associated with mental illness.² Their Comment led us to wonder whether these euphemistic tendencies are evident in mainstream media outlets.

We examined word use regarding mental health in the mainstream

media, as reflected by articles in the digital archives of *The New York Times*, Associated Press, and Reuters. Using the New York Times Developer Application Programming Interface, we queried 10 012 196 articles published since 1940 for key words in the title, byline, or body. Specifically, we identified the proportion of articles per year containing the terms “mental health” or “mental illness”. Additionally, to borrow the suggestion of Bhugra and colleagues, we considered common chronic physical conditions by including the comparator search terms of “diabetes” and “hypertension”. Finally, to account for the fact that more articles are published per year now than in 1940, we focused on the

percentage of all articles that included each search term, rather than the absolute number of articles with that term. The code developed for these analyses is available online.

Since 1940, there has been a clear increase in the percentage of articles containing either “mental health” or “mental illness” (figure). The two trends are strongly correlated (Pearson's r 0.85, 95% CI 0.77–0.90, $p < 0.0001$), but “mental health” is—and always has been—used more frequently than “mental illness”.

The comparison with chronic physical conditions offers further food for thought. Growth in the use of the term “mental health” has been mirrored by “diabetes” but not “hypertension”—even though the two terms were used similarly frequently in the early 1960s (figure). Although the prevalence of health-related terms in articles from these publishers has increased, it seems that not all illnesses are equally interesting in the eyes of these particular publishers.

Psychiatry faces tremendous obstacles to ensuring that effective treatments and support are provided to the patients who need them,³ including those relating to stigma. Bhugra and colleagues felt that “mental health” is more commonly used than “mental illness”. Some health-care services are defined by what they do (eg, surgery clinic), others by the illness they treat (eg, cancer centre), and still others by what they attempt to achieve (eg, Connecticut Mental Health Center). This factor could explain the relative dominance of “mental health” over “mental illness”.

These data suggest that, in the public eye, “mental health” has always been the preferred term. “Mental illness” might never have laid claim at all.

AMC holds equity in Spring Health and a provisional patent for treatment selection for major depressive disorder. JHK is the editor of *Biological Psychiatry*; has been a paid consultant for LLC, AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals, Biogen, Biomedisyn Corporation, Forum Pharmaceuticals, Janssen Pharmaceuticals,

For the Developer Application Programming Interface see <https://developer.nytimes.com>

For the code developed for these analyses see <https://github.com/achekroud/ NYT>

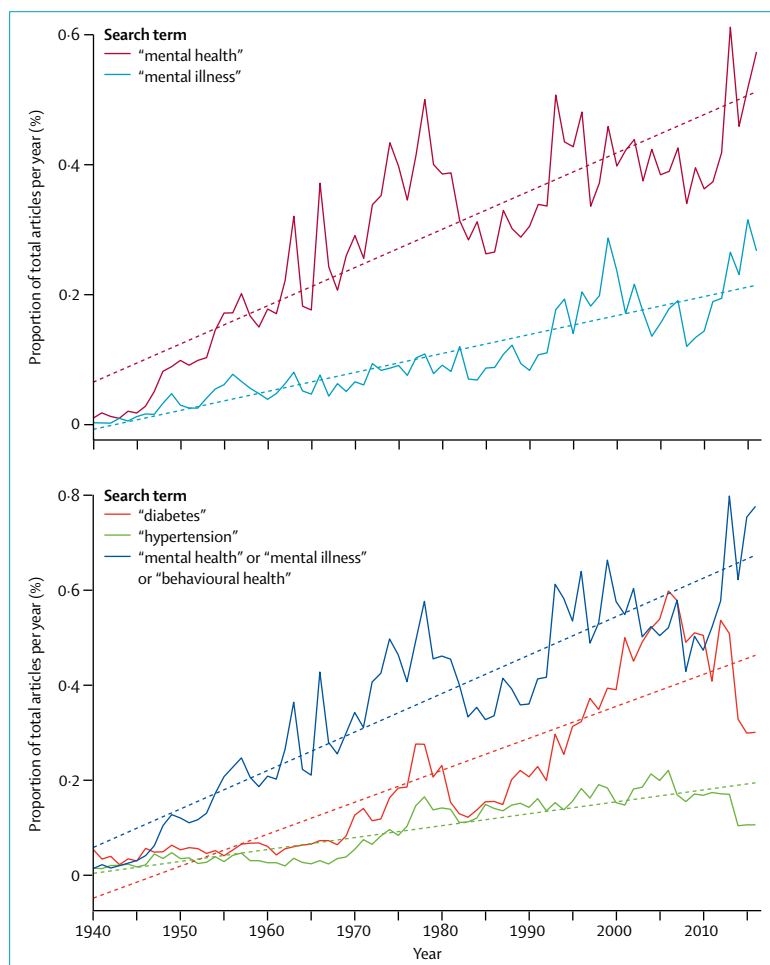


Figure: The use of “mental health” and “mental illness” in popular media
 (A) Use of the term “mental health” vs “mental illness”. (B) Use of terms related to mental health compared with terms related to physical health conditions.

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