

# face equality

## MEDIA, ADVERTISING AND FILM



### Disfigurement in the media

One in every 111 people in the UK has a significant disfigurement to their face. Disfigurement can affect anyone at any time across age, ethnicity and background.

A public attitude survey conducted in January 2008 showed that 90% of the general public find it difficult to attach positive qualities to people with disfigurements.

It showed that whilst not believing they do this, they implicitly judge people with disfigurements as being less attractive, less likely to succeed, less socially skilled and less likely to lead happy contented lives.

The scale of the bias against people with disfigurements in the UK survey was stronger than that found in similar surveys conducted in the USA on other issues such as race, sexuality, age and gender.

Every day, people who have disfigurements – and their parents, family and friends – are influenced by what the media in all its forms says about disfigurement. Press, TV, film and advertising portrayals frame how society thinks about disfigurement.

People who contact *Changing Faces* tell us that current depictions of disfigurement in the media create a distorted, uninformed and negative view of disfigurement and lead to exclusion, teasing and bullying. This can result in prejudice and discrimination.

***'If programme makers had the courage to take the plunge and be more imaginative in terms of casting and writing characters, seeing people with unusual faces could just become a regular thing and not frightening at all. But the impact this would have on us would be extraordinary.'***

***'Wouldn't it be great to see more people with birthmarks, scars and other facial conditions in adverts doing everyday things like eating yoghurt?'***

***'Why do people in horror films always have some form of disfigurement? Don't they realise the impact this can have on how people see me?'***

## The reasons for change

In the media, disfigurement/disfiguring conditions are often described with negative words and imagery. Words – like horrifically disfigured, grotesquely scarred, ugly birthmark, misshapen head – are commonly used.

**'She was horrifically disfigured in a car crash in 1999, on her way home from a party when her car was hit by a drunk driver.'** *Sunday Times*, 11th December 2005.

**'Face transplant for Elephant Man.'** *Daily Telegraph*, 23rd January 2007.

**'As he recovers – from a terrible disfigurement to the face – it became obvious that his personality has changed.'** *Daily Mirror*, 21st September 2007.

Coverage of disfigurement also tends to be medicalised – people with disfigurements are often the subject of documentaries that present them

as quirks of nature, abnormal or in need of surgery. People who have disfigurements are rarely seen in soaps, game shows or as incidental characters in drama or comedy.

In film, disfigurement is often used as a device to portray evil characteristics such as Freddie Kreuger in *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and the countless villains in Bond movies and many other films. In theatre, the sad stories such as *Phantom of the Opera* reinforce the idea of lives being blighted forever by disfigurement.

People with disfigurements are not represented in mainstream advertising. Instead they tend to be subjects of charity adverts, presenting them as objects of pity, or fire prevention and drink drive adverts – with the message that if you aren't careful you will end up looking like this.

Advertisements for cosmetic surgery and the beauty industry portray

scars, blemishes and other forms of disfigurement as unsightly and to be removed.

## Getting it right

Those that get it right in the media, advertising and film in relation to portrayals of disfigurement make sure that they are:

- Informed about the causes and effects of disfigurement.
- Have an open mind about the life and prospects of people with disfigurements.
- Develop films, programmes and adverts in partnerships with organisations like *Changing Faces* and people who have disfigurements themselves.

For further information go to [www.changingfaces.org.uk](http://www.changingfaces.org.uk)

## What you can do

**Stand out.** Show your support for face equality

*Changing Faces* calls on

- The Department of Culture, Media and Sport, and those departments at local and devolved levels, to develop policies and guidelines to ensure fairer, broader and more factual reporting and portrayals of disfigurement in media, film and advertising.
- The media, advertisers and the film industry to adopt more factual and unbiased portrayals of people with disfigurements, actively avoiding prejudicial language and imagery.

In particular, we believe:

- Journalists and editors in press and broadcasting should sign up to a voluntary code of practice (see [www.changingfaces.org.uk](http://www.changingfaces.org.uk)) committing to factual and unbiased reporting of disfigurement.
- Broadcasters should commit to a broader range of portrayals of disfigurement throughout programming.
- Advertising agencies and their professional bodies like the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising should take the lead in including people with disfigurements in mainstream advertising and should put pressure on casting agencies to recruit actors with disfigurements.
- The film industry and professional bodies such as the UK Film Council should commit to showing a broader range of portrayals of disfigurement in films.

**Changing** faces  
the way you face  
disfigurement

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