

THE PRESS COUNCIL

PART II

Complaint No. Z15483/D5792

JONES against THE MAIL ON SUNDAY

- II.1 The complaint was formally represented to Mr Stewart Steven, editor of THE MAIL ON SUNDAY, on 9 Sep 88, and Mr Steven responded on 24 Sep 88:
- (1) It is untrue to say that The Mail on Sunday has ever been motivated by malice towards Dr. Jones or that it recently published an unwarranted, unfair and misconceived attack upon him.
 - (2) On the contrary, the Mail on Sunday would say that Dr. Jones, is unreasonably obsessed by this newspaper and its journalism.
 - (3) Having said that, we can well understand that working as he does with haemophiliacs and seeing the tragic consequences of the AIDS virus on these sad people he should react as strongly as he does whenever this matter is discussed.
 - (4) I wish to make it plain, therefore, that it would never occur to me for a moment to write a leading article accusing Dr. Jones of being responsible for the deaths of haemophiliacs exposed to the AIDS virus. It is unthinkable that I or anyone else could ever believe that of him. Accordingly, I believe that anybody who read that meaning into our article could only be someone obsessed with himself and with this newspaper.
 - (5) We do, of course, believe that Dr. Jones was one of those many people who contributed to the aura of secrecy surrounding AIDS and haemophiliacs a few years ago. They were motivated by the best of possible reasons, namely not to alarm their patients. It has always been my view that they were misconceived. If there had been sufficient public outcry then there might, just might, have been a greater degree of Governmental concern to provide the money necessary to help ensure that our blood supply remained uncontaminated and that heat-treating systems were put in place more quickly than they were.
 - (6) As I have frequently stated, it is one of the functions of a newspaper to be alarmist because Governments of all stripes and persuasions are complacent. As long as doctors and health workers were quietly expressing their anxieties in the corridors of Whitehall, nothing, or next to nothing, was being done. The moment that newspapers started expressing alarm on this subject, action began to be taken. This is not a question of opinion; this is a matter of fact.
 - (7) Dr. Jones clearly takes a different view. Two or three years ago he came to see me and we spoke for sometime. I could not understand the purpose of the visit until a week or so later I discovered that a book which he had written on haemophilia was about to be published. Clearly he believed that this newspaper would take every opportunity to attack him and that this book would give us just such a chance.

- (C) That incident caused some wry amusement in the office indicating as it did his state of mind. The fact is that any "malice" we feel towards him is wholly imaginary. It simply would not occur to us to seek every opportunity to denigrate his work or to attack him personally.
- (7) Our only interest is not with Dr. Jones but with that issue with which the Press Council is, by now, more than familiar.
- (10) We believe the Press Council was largely responsible for all these problems. It and it alone had issued that disgraceful, crass and ignorant ruling of March 18, 1984 in which it stated that our article, the subject of the original complaint, had been presented in "extravagant and alarmist terms not justified by the evidence" and that our headline "Hospitals Using Killer Blood" was "unacceptably sensational".
- (11) Bearing in mind that the word "AIDS" was not a word which meant anything to the general reader I would still like to hear of an alternative headline phrase for "Killer blood" to describe blood which we all now know can kill and kill in the most hideous circumstances.
- (12) I believe the Press Council on this occasion should reject Dr. Jones' complaint. We are not interested in attacking him. We are only interested in drawing attention, time and time again, to the fact that this is a country where there is an unacceptable level of secrecy in all matters including those involving the medical profession. AIDS is just one example of many but one in which we ourselves were involved.
- (13) The Press Council should take this opportunity to at last withdraw its previous ruling which caused so much ill will and which was so clearly and so self evidently misconceived.
- (14) The Press Council frequently asks newspapers to correct their errors and it is right to do so. But cannot the Press Council find it in its heart to do the same?