

Perhaps the 30 minutes allotted to the panel was not enough time in which to redirect interpretation. We can only hope that the books and study-guides, of whose existence Bernard Towers informs us, will fill in the powerfully dangerous gaps left inevitably by the showing of *JROWS* in an educational context. Student viewers of the film might then see the differences between what was, what is, and what ought to be.

Joan Robinson wanted to make this film so that others might benefit from her experiences. Sadly, the public television version of her life and dying, poorly edited and poorly interpreted afterwards, conflicts with Joan's wishes.

Reference

- (1) Towers, B. Report from America: A television triumph about death and dying. *Journal of medical ethics* 1980; 6: 101-102.

Response

Bernard Towers *University of California, Los Angeles: American Correspondent, Journal of medical ethics*

All the criticisms voiced by your correspondents were vigorously pursued during the weeks preceding the broadcast. Opposition to public screening, especially from the politically powerful *American Cancer Society (ACS)*, a private fund-raising organisation, was intense. In the result, and despite all efforts by what I called 'the cancer industry' to persuade the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) to drop its plans, all stations except one did broadcast the film. Moreover, in view of the general response, the broadcast was repeated nationwide on 15 September 1980 to renewed critical acclaim.

Many patients and friends of patients were prompted to use the telephone hot-lines. There is something skewed about the sample of four frightened patients reported by your correspondents. However, they at least were prompted to call and to create for themselves an opportunity for open and honest dialogue with their medical advisors. Therapy and prognosis for ovarian cancer have not changed all that much, in fact; the incidence is increasing, and patients have a right to ask frank questions. Some may indeed do better with only supportive psychological therapy. Joan Robinson, in contrast, looked to modern technological medicine for active intervention with a view to cure almost to the end. It is not surprising that the ACS was defensive about the results here portrayed with total honesty.

Two governmental agencies, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Cancer Institute (NCI) supported the film throughout the controversy. The NCI has

published an analysis of 1526 letters received in response to the broadcast. (1) Only three (0.19 per cent) were critical, and two of those were unsigned. More than 30 per cent were from cancer patients, or relatives or friends of patients, and more than 12 per cent were from health professionals. Earlier figures from the same office are quoted by Eric Robinson in an extensive review article recently published by the National Association of Educational Broadcasters. (2)

Controversial topics, and controversial treatment of such topics, tend naturally to generate discussion, especially perhaps amongst those of us who are members of the *Society for Health and Human Values*. This body supported the film, and its president co-ordinated a series of five recorded panel-discussions on some of the sensitive issues raised by *JROWS*. As to the editorial policy criticised by your correspondents, a policy which deliberately eschewed the kind of voice-overs and other tricks of the TV trade that they advocate, it should be realised that this was precisely how Joan wanted her story to be told. The benefits, in my view, far outweigh the drawbacks. Far from detracting from the quality of the production this method of editing positively enhanced it. Audiences are sceptical of most documentary films precisely because they know that the 'message' is determined and packaged by the producer-editor. Joan wanted her story told the way she lived it, the way it was 'warts and all'. Her husband and her producer-friend honoured her wishes.

The additional teaching-modules to which I referred in my article have now been released by Time-Life Video of New York. The series is entitled 'Coping With Serious Illness'. Six thirty-minute presentations are introduced by Meryl Streep, whose sensitive playing in *Kramer vs Kramer* won her an Oscar.

I am currently teaching an undergraduate seminar entitled 'Approaches to Death'. The students have gained, through *JROWS* and all the teaching materials to which the film has given rise, much insight into and compassion for all those involved in coping with terminal illness. They do not generalise, as my critics suggest, from what was called quite precisely 'One Woman's Story'. Had it been editorialised in the way suggested by Curry, Zucker and Trautmann, then, no matter how sensitively done, the film would not have been the triumph that I reported it to be.

References

- (1) Office of Cancer Communications Memorandum, Sept 2: (typescript 29 pp. including 6 tables), National Cancer Institute: National Institutes of Health, 1980.
- (2) Robinson E. Joan Robinson: One woman's story. The aftermath. *Public telecommunications review* 1980; 8(4): 5-13.