

Summary: Health Journalism Ethics: A Victorian Example

Diana Garissi

- The case of a soldier who was flogged then died from his wounds illustrates the way medical issues were handled by the press in Victorian England (1846).
- Press attention focused on this case as the campaign to end flogging gathered momentum.
- Flogging injuries were at the time considered only to be skin deep, but reports and subsequent correspondence began to consider the effects on underlying tissues.
- Much attention was given to a strip of missing skin, which attracted a lot of speculation in the press about its significance. It was eventually found to have been inflicted post mortem.
- The case hastened the end of flogging as a punishment.
- This also showed the way the press sensationalised health stories and encouraged speculation which was unfounded – much as the press today are criticised for misreporting health stories.
- The focus on the missing skin reflected press catering to prevailing horror and excitement by the public, but in fact had no medico-legal significance.
- Lingering on anatomical detail remains a risk today, for much the same reasons.