

Alcohol and Drug Misuse Media Guidelines

Introduction

- Alcohol and drug misuse are often topics for reporting in the media.
- Stories can range from coverage of drug seizures and arrests, to binge drinking in city centres, to health consequences and fatal incidents that can involve alcohol and/or drug misuse.
- While it is important that all reporting passes on the necessary information and news, and also where appropriate personalises the story to gain the interest of the reader/viewer, it is crucial that any reporting is handled in a way that does not inadvertently normalise alcohol and drug misuse (making it seem though this is part of everyday life), increase experimentation, or stigmatise users and their families.

Stereotypes and Stigma

- It is important to remember that individuals who misuse alcohol and drugs are people too. They have families and friends, and they may have children or other dependants.
- They have gone through a range of experiences that have led them to alcohol or drug misuse. Their stories and circumstances can be very different (some will be recreational users / some will be dependant) and they are not a homogenous group who can be put into one stereotype.
- Language is vital – for example often you will see use of the word “Junkie” and here people talk about “being clean”. By using this type of language, it may be seen that the person has been written off and put into a stereotype that defines them by their action rather than who they are.
- It is perhaps inevitable that words like this are used as an easy reference which is readily understandable. But it also stops further thought and exploration of who the person is, and what has led them to substance misuse – it almost seems to box them into a corner they cannot escape from.
- It is true that if somebody has a serious alcohol or drug problem (and not everyone who uses alcohol or drugs has a serious problem), then much of their daily life will focus around using and buying alcohol/drugs, but that isn’t the sum total of who they are.
- The best outcome for the individual, their family and friends, and for society as a whole, is that those who misuse substances seek help, receive treatment and reintegrate back into everyday life. However, if all those who misuse alcohol and/or drugs are portrayed

as “bad people”, it makes it harder for them to seek treatment or discuss their problems with family, friends, or their GP.

- Those in recovery from alcohol and drug misuse often say that it was the dignity and respect they received from someone else – perhaps a certain health professional or family member – that made all the difference.
- Therefore people don’t need labels; they need someone to recognise the human being underneath.
- This isn’t to say we should approve of substance use and misuse, but that we should not stigmatise people with addictions, especially those seeking to rebuild their lives.

Drug Scares

- The media can play a vital role in getting out clear information that could help prevent further tragedies or save someone’s life.
- However, evidence shows that the way some scares are handled can actually increase awareness of the availability of drugs and therefore potentially increase experimentation.
- It is important in these situations to focus on the potential health and social impacts of the substance.
- Reports of “strong batches” and “strong effects” may actually increase drug-seeking behaviour, as people may seek out these substances.
- Mephedrone was an example of how the media/reporting can promote the availability for a drug – with pictures of reporters standing outside shops where they had been “legally purchased”. Again, raising awareness of these issues is important but care should be taken not to advertise where these substances are available.

“Legal Highs”

- We don’t use the term “legal highs”.
- These are substances that have a psychoactive effect but are not currently covered by the UK-wide Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.
- The term “legal highs” is a very misleading and can lead to the perception that these substances are legal to sell for human consumption and are safe.
- This is not the case as this is prohibited by the Human Medicines Regulations 2012 – that is why these substances are marked as “not for human consumption” or sold as “research chemicals”, “bath salts” or “plant food”. The Psychoactive Substances Act also bans the supply on any unlicensed or regulated Psychoactive substances.

- The term “legal highs” can also lead to the perception that these substances are “safe”. Again this is not the case as we have seen much evidence about the impact these substances have on health and wellbeing. In addition, when tested many of these substances that are supposed to be legal have in fact been found to contain banned substances – so people are also risking a criminal conviction.
- Finally – these substances have various effects; some are stimulants, some sedatives, others hallucinogens, entactogens or empathogens (substances that produce distinctive emotional and social effects similar to those of MDMA). Therefore the word ‘high’ does not accurately describe their range of effects as ‘high’ is normally associated with the use of stimulant drugs.
- Given all this, it is clear that the term “legal highs” is misleading and instead we have adopted ‘New Psychoactive Substances’ (new substances which affects the brain).

Alcohol and drug related deaths

- Alcohol and drug-related deaths can also generate lots of headlines, coverage and concern.
- Alcohol and drug-related deaths do occur, and these tragic incidents can be used to raise awareness of the impact and harms (both health and social) associated with alcohol or drug misuse.
- However, investigating deaths can take time and while deaths may initially be believed to be alcohol or drug-related, it may turn out later that other factors caused the death.
- Given this, it is important not to identify people at an early stage, as their family may not believe or agree that the death was alcohol or drug-related, and therefore the situation should be dealt with sensitively until the outcomes are known, so as not to stigmatise the deceased or their family.
- Reports of deaths also often focus on “bad batches”. Over 100 people in Northern Ireland die each year for drug-related causes – therefore drug misuse is inherently risky. Portraying deaths as only being from a “bad” or contaminated batch can inadvertently make it seem like other drugs are safe or safer – when this is not actually the case.

Key Lines:

- All substance misuse – be it illegal drugs (such as cocaine or cannabis), prescription substances that haven’t been prescribed for you, alcohol, or new psychoactive substances – carries real risk to your health and wellbeing.

- You can never be sure what any drug actually contains – and it is possible to have an unexpected or fatal response to any drug, even if you have taken it before.
- If you think you have a problem with alcohol or drug misuse (including prescription or over-the-counter drugs) you should seek help and support.
- Talk to your GP – or contact one of the many services funded across Northern Ireland to provide support. A directory of services is available on the Public Health Agency Website: <http://drugsandalcoholni.info/services-near-you/>
- For those who can't, or won't, seek treatment and who will continue taking drugs, the Public Health Agency have produced harm reduction advice to try to reduce risks: <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/harm-reduction-drug-users>.
- Advice on alcohol intake is available here: <http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/alcohol/Pages/Alcoholhome.aspx>
- Information on a range of substances can be found online at the FRANK Website: <http://www.talktofrank.com/drugs-a-z>.
- Alternatively, the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency can provide local up-to-date information.

Statistics

- Information on the number alcohol and drug-related deaths is available on the following website: <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp30.htm>
- The most recent statistics on alcohol and drug misuse in Northern Ireland can be found at: http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-public-health/stats-drug-alcohol.htm

Guides

- The Society of Editors, in partnership with the UK Drug Policy Commission, has produced *Dealing with the Stigma of Drugs: A Guide for Journalists*. This guide aims to help journalists report accurately and objectively to help combat stigma, without telling editors or journalists what to think or write. The guide is available at: <http://www.societyofeditors.co.uk/userfiles/files/DrugsReportingStigma-251012FinalLowRes.pdf>