

Adjudication 1727: The Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Association of Australasia/The Daily Telegraph (December 2017)

Document Type: Complaints

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Outcome: Adjudications

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The Press Council considered a complaint from The Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Association of Australasia about an article published in The Daily Telegraph on 12 July 2017, headed "FAT CHANCE OF BEING HEALTHY: Young Aussies have only themselves to blame" in print and "Junk food, alcohol and drugs are fuelling health crisis in young adults" online.

The print article included a graphic below the headline featuring the following statistics: "1/3 of Australia's young people live in New South Wales"; "37% of 16-to-24-year-olds consume alcohol at levels posing a lifetime risk to health"; "12.2% of 16-to-24-year-old males, 21.6 per cent of females experiencing high or very high psychological distress"; "16.8% of secondary school students in Australia are attracted to people of the same sex as them or to both sexes"; "11% of 12-to-17 year-olds used illicit drugs in the past 12 months"; "37% of males and 21 per cent of females aged 16 to 24 are overweight or obese"; "30% of 18-to-24-year-olds used illicit drugs in the past 12 months"; and "Cannabis most used illicit drug".

The article referred to "[t]he worrying findings...contained in a new wide-ranging report that reveals the true state of the health of NSW's young people, covering everything from sexuality to obesity". Further on, the article repeated that "[s]exuality was also canvassed, with 16.8 per cent of secondary school students in Australia reporting they are attracted to people of the same sex or to both sexes".

The complainant said the headline "FAT CHANCE OF BEING HEALTHY" and sub-headline "Young Aussies have only themselves to blame", followed by the statistic about same-sex attraction in the centre among statistics relating to matters such as obesity and drug use, suggested same-sex attraction is unhealthy and warrants blame. The complainant said this association between ill health and sexual orientation was inaccurate, unfair and significantly harmful.

The complainant said any notion that sexual identity, in whatever form it takes, is either a choice or a medical problem is false, and coverage like this contributes to health concerns such as increased suicide risk for young same-sex attracted people.

The publication said the graphic was composed by someone other than the person who composed the headline and was placed on the page just before deadline. If it were to publish the article again, the publication said it would not have run the headline and graphic together.

However, it said the article, including the statistics in the graphic, were gathered from the NSW report referred to in the article—the Youth Health Framework 2017-2024—which noted the percentage of reported same-sex attraction, that LGBTI young people are at a higher risk of poorer mental health, and that sexuality is one of the demographic factors which may impact how young people approach and manage their health.

It said the article did not link the issue of sexual identity to ill health. The headline, which focused on diet and obesity, was not intended to refer to the non-diet issues in the graphic and should be read with the article. It said the graphic was designed to mirror the statistics in the article and not to single out sexuality as an aspect of ill health, pointing out the other non-diet related statistic in the graphic which referred to one third of Australia's young people being in NSW.

In response to criticism of the article, its editor promptly issued a statement via social media which said the presentation of the article had unfortunately been misinterpreted, that the article in no way suggested or intended to suggest that same-sex relationships are unhealthy, and there was no judgement expressed in the article other than relating to diet.

Conclusion

The Council's Standards of Practice require that publications take reasonable steps to ensure that factual material is accurate and not misleading (General Principle 1) and presented with reasonable fairness and balance (General Principle 3). If the material is significantly inaccurate or misleading, or not reasonably fair and balanced, publications must take reasonable steps to provide adequate remedial action or an opportunity for a response to be published (General Principles 2 and 4).

The Standards of Practice also require that publications take reasonable steps to avoid causing or contributing materially to substantial offence, distress or prejudice, or to a substantial risk to health or safety (General Principle 6), unless doing so is sufficiently in the public interest.

The print headline appeared as part of the graphic with a similar coloured design and background that distinguished it from the rest of the article below the graphic. Given this, the Council does not accept that the headline should be read as distinct from the graphic.

The Council also considers that there is a significant difference between reporting on same-sex attraction as a demographic factor which may affect young people's mental health, as referred to in the NSW Youth Health Framework, and reporting it as a lifestyle-related health factor such as poor diet and drug use.

The Council concludes that the headline "FAT CHANCE OF BEING HEALTHY" and sub-headline "Young Aussies have only themselves to blame" with the statistic that "16.8% of secondary school students are attracted to people of the same sex or to both sexes" associated the students reporting same-sex attraction with people affected by unhealthy lifestyle factors. In such circumstances, the presentation of the article was significantly misleading. Accordingly, the publication breached General Principle 1.

The Council notes the publication's public response online to complaints from the public. However, this public statement was not published in print and did not acknowledge or apologise for the misleading nature of the graphic. Rather, it attributed the impression to readers having misconstrued the article. Given this, this response did not constitute adequate remedial action and accordingly, the publication also breached General Principle 2.

The Council concludes that the reference to ill health and blame in the headlines, with the statistic about same-sex attraction displayed among factors such as obesity and drug use, suggested same-sex attraction is unhealthy and blameworthy. As a result, the article caused substantial offence, distress, prejudice and risk to public health and safety, and there was no public interest justifying this. Accordingly, the publication breached General Principle 6.

Given its conclusions on other aspects of the complaint, the Council considers it unnecessary to reach conclusions in relation to General Principles 3 and 4.

Relevant Council Standards

This Adjudication applies the following General Principles of the Council.

Publications must take reasonable steps to:

1. Ensure that factual material in news reports and elsewhere is accurate and not misleading, and is distinguishable from other material such as opinion.
2. Provide a correction or other adequate remedial action if published material is significantly inaccurate or misleading.
3. Ensure that factual material is presented with reasonable fairness and balance, and that writers' expressions of opinion are not based on significantly inaccurate factual material or omission of key facts.
4. Ensure that where material refers adversely to a person, a fair opportunity is given for subsequent publication of a reply if that is reasonably necessary to address a possible breach of General Principle 3.

6. Avoid causing or contributing materially to substantial offence, distress or prejudice, or a substantial risk to health or safety, unless doing so is sufficiently in the public interest.