

ASH/ Passive smoking/ Letter from ASH to PCC

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Press Complaints Commission
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ASH

Action on Smoking
and Health

25th March 1998

Dear Sir or Madam

Re: Sunday Telegraph reports on passive smoking, 8-15 March 1998

I wish to make a complaint about Sunday Telegraph reporting based on a front page article headlined "*Passive smoking doesn't cause cancer - official*" which appeared on 8th March. This story relates to an epidemiological study of the relationship between lung cancer and exposure to passive smoking in the home and in the workplace. The study was conducted by the International Agency for Research into Cancer (IARC) which is part of the WHO. The Sunday Telegraph story was inaccurate, distorted and misleading. There has been no withdrawal or apology.

An accompanying editorial "*A setback for nanny*" repeats inaccuracies in the front page article and adds a series of assertions suggesting improper motives on behalf of the World Health Organization that are pure conjecture and not grounded in facts or evidence. These assertions, though clearly unsubstantiated, have not been withdrawn and there has been no apology.

Finally, follow-up pieces the next week "*No 'significant' risk in passive smoking*" and "*Behind the smokescreen*" rejected the criticisms made of the original article during the week, stood by the story, and made a series of unfounded accusations against those that had criticised it during the week. In an attempt to stand by its original story, the second article restated its case, but in different terms to the first article. It continued, wrongly, to maintain that the study justifies the assertion "*you may not like smoke in your face, but it doesn't look as if it will kill you.*" It played on the word 'significant' which is used in a formal statistical sense, to suggest the risks are insignificant. At no point did it acknowledge, withdraw or apologise for the bold and thoroughly incorrect assertions made the previous week. The three articles and editorial are at Appendix 1.

I have reviewed the PCC Code of Practice and believe the Code has been very clearly violated at paragraphs 1.i, 1.ii, 1.iii and 1.iv - the paragraphs relating to 'Accuracy' in the four related pieces described above. The relevant part of the Code is at Appendix 2.

The inaccuracies

The two main inaccuracies on which the story was based are:

1. That the study was 'withheld' with the suggested motive that the WHO did this because it did not want its existing stance on passive smoking proved wrong. This is completely incorrect. The study has been submitted to a refereed academic journal, the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* of the United States. It is standard academic and research practice not to comment on research findings until they have been published in a refereed journal. The allegation in the article and subsequent failure to withdraw it, breaches the code at: para 1.i because it is inaccurate; at 1.ii because it was not subsequently withdrawn when it was clearly shown to be incorrect; at 1.iii because no apology was made; at para 1.iv because the suggested motive of wanting to conceal evidence that contradicted the WHO's position was not only inaccurate it was pure conjecture for which no evidence other than the incorrect allegation was offered.
2. That the allegedly suppressed IARC study supports the headline "Passive smoking doesn't cause cancer - official" and the opening paragraph "*The world's leading health organisation has withheld from publication a study which shows that not only might there be no link between passive smoking and lung cancer, but that it could even have a protective effect.*" According to the WHO, the Sunday Telegraph's reporting of the findings was "*false and misleading*" and according to the IARC the "*alleged negativity of the study is in sharp contrast with what is reported in the [WHO/IARC] article.*" The reporting breaches the code at paragraph 1.i because it is inaccurate and misleading; at 1.ii because no withdrawal was made, instead a further and

flawed attempt to justify the story was made the following week; and at 1.iii because no apology was made.

The press releases from WHO and IARC, and an abstract of the IARC study released by the WHO to clarify the findings of the study are at Appendix 3.

Criticism of the Sunday Telegraph

The response from the WHO (9 March) and IARC (11 March) above could not have been clearer. Referring to the two inaccuracies described above, the WHO states "*both statements are untrue*". The Chief Medical Officer, Sir Kenneth Calman, stated that the WHO's study had been "*misreported*". The Sunday Telegraph reporting was strongly criticised later in the week at a launch of the report of the Government's Scientific Committee on Tobacco and Health on 12th March. No serious commentators or experts have defended its position. This amounts to serious criticism of the newspaper from the most credible sources.

ASH prepared a straightforward explanation of how the IARC findings had been misinterpreted and made this available to the Sunday Telegraph on 13th March 1998. This ASH paper had been reviewed by Dr. Martin Jarvis who is a member of the Government's Scientific Committee on Tobacco and Health and is attached at Appendix 4. The paper shows clearly how a statistical confidence test applied to the IARC results had been misleadingly interpreted and reported - the fact that the IARC study in isolation did not find *definitive* proof of a link between passive smoking and lung cancer was wrongly interpreted as evidence supporting the claim that there is no link - a simplistic error that appeared to inform the headline: "*Passive smoking doesn't cause cancer - official*". In short, the survey did find a positive correlation between passive smoking and lung cancer, but on account of the small sample size it was not possible to state with 95% confidence that the survey had shown the link definitively. The eminent epidemiologist Sir Richard Doll expressed this as follows: "*on its own the study is not definitive, but it contributes to the weight of evidence* [supporting the link]." Sir Richard Doll's statement was mis-used in "*No 'significant' risk in passive smoking*" to imply support for the original Sunday Telegraph stance, but in fact he makes a completely different point, which is that the study adds to the body of evidence confirming a link.

A more thorough discussion of statistical confidence testing is set out in the attached ASH document - an important point is to note the distinction between the formal language of statisticians and ordinary language. If the result of a survey assessing a risk is deemed to be 'statistically insignificant' this is not the same as arguing that the risk is insignificant - it is a comment on how much confidence there is in the result, which in turn is a measure of the design of the survey and the coherence of the results.

The Sunday Telegraph's response

Two further articles appeared on 15th March, "*No 'significant' risk in passive smoking*" and "*Behind the smokescreen*". These stood by the previous week's story which it claimed was not "false and misleading" as stated by the WHO/IARC. Further, the first article falsely implied support among experts for the Sunday Telegraph's stance and second article claimed that critics had misrepresented the previous week's story, challenged it with irrelevant arguments and argued that the Sunday Telegraph's position was supported by "*details that critics of the Sunday Telegraph chose to overlook*" - implying that a deliberate choice had been made to give a selective interpretation of the research. The Sunday Telegraph also suggested the criticism was because of embarrassment caused to the WHO and 'emotion' attached to arguments over passive smoking. Each of these claims is unfounded: the theme of the previous week's article could not have been more boldly stated than in the headline - and this conclusion was completely inaccurate and no support was offered by the experts quoted; the criticism was directed only at the Sunday Telegraph's statements regarding passive smoking and nothing else - the WHO, IARC and ASH statements refer only to passive smoking and the research in question; the arguments advanced by ASH and others and repeated herein are in no way emotional - they are grounded in a desire to see the research correctly reported and interpreted.

The second article shows that the Sunday Telegraph was struggling to reconcile its first article with the fact, but was trying to avoid admitting it had made a mistake. Thus the headline "*Passive smoking doesn't cause cancer - official*" is repeated in a 'rag-out' picture of the previous week's paper but not discussed in the article. Instead the Sunday Telegraph states that "*Our article was based on one fact: the WHO has failed to show any statistically significant risk that passive smoking causes cancer*". This is not at all the same as "*Passive smoking doesn't cause cancer*". The article claims the study is "*bad news for those hailing the WHO results as proof positive of a cancer link with passive smoking*". In fact the Sunday Telegraph was hailing the study as proof positive of no link. The Sunday Telegraph continued its evasive revisionism with the argument that "*the results are - as the Sunday Telegraph stated - consistent with there being no real risk, or even with there being a reduced risk*". It failed to point out that this is not what it had claimed the previous week, nor did it state that using the same reasoning

the results could also be consistent with risks considerably higher than generally accepted - the upper bound of the 95% confidence interval is a relative risk of 1.44 - whereas the generally accepted range is 1.1 to 1.3. The impression once again was that the IARC study supported the thesis that there is no risk, but it quite clearly does not.

Role of the tobacco industry

It is not clear how much the Sunday Telegraph relied on tobacco industry analysis of this study. However, it is known that BAT Industries, the world's second largest tobacco company, has been promoting this interpretation of the IARC study around the world and that BAT is extensively and favourably quoted in the piece. In a profile of the author of the piece in PR Week (20th March 1998) she says "*But I'm not precious, I realise that PR is vital to my job and if I'm offered a good story that shows a client in a good light I'll do it of course, but only because it's a good story.*" The 'false and misleading' story published in the Sunday Telegraph has formed the basis of a world-wide tobacco industry media campaign and the effect has been to undermine efforts of public health bodies in many developing countries. The story was, in our view, deliberately 'planted' by the tobacco industry prior to a week in which they expected a major Government report (the SCOTH report) to state that there is conclusive evidence that passive smoking causes lung cancer and other diseases. Other press coverage also suggests this is the case and clearly condemns the Sunday Telegraph's line - articles from the Guardian and the British Medical Journal, and a summary of the press coverage over the period are enclosed at Appendix 5.

Conclusion

The Sunday Telegraph has accused the WHO/IARC of concealing a study and suggested improper motives for doing this. The Sunday Telegraph provided a completely 'false and misleading' account of the study. When it was criticised it made a number of unfounded accusations of its critics, refused to withdraw the story or apologise and continued to try to argue, though utterly unconvincingly, that it had been right all along. In our view, this violates the PCC Code of Conduct at many different points. We believe the PCC should require the Sunday Telegraph to withdraw the story and print a prominent correction. It should acknowledge its errors and apologise to its readers for misleading them, and to the WHO and IARC for making inaccurate statements and unfounded allegations about their work and their motives respectively.

In our view, this is not a trivial issue - the story has appeared all round the world, often drawing on the Sunday Telegraph as a voice of authority. A number of British media outlets also uncritically picked up the Sunday Telegraph story. The effect was to create confusion and the appearance of controversy where there is in fact a broad consensus that was reaffirmed later in the week following the first article with the report of the SCOTH committee. The creation of the appearance of controversy is a long running tobacco industry PR tactic.

Finally, I did discuss the problems with the reporting with the journalist and sent a written analysis in the week following initial publication (on 13th March) and suggested a retraction. The WHO also ensured its press release was sent for the attention of the Editor. There has also been critical reporting in other newspapers. I believe the Sunday Telegraph has had ample opportunity to consider its reporting and has chosen to dismiss critics and to try to stand by its story using the flawed arguments set out above.

Yours sincerely,

Clive Bates

Director

Attachments:

Appendix 1:	Sunday Telegraph articles and editorial
Appendix 2:	Extract from PCC Code of Conduct
Appendix 3:	WHO and IARC press releases condemning Sunday Telegraph report as 'false and misleading'
Appendix 4:	How the Sunday Telegraph got it wrong - an explanation of the simple statistical errors made
Appendix 5:	Sunday Telegraph press statement attacking ASH
Appendix 6:	ASH reply to Sunday Telegraph Editor in response to their press statement
Appendix 7:	Sunday Telegraph defence against the complaint
Appendix 8:	ASH critique of the Sunday Telegraph defence
Appendix 9:	WHO / IARC study: "Multicenter Case - Control Study of Exposure to Environmental Tobacco Smoke and Lung Cancer in Europe"

Appendix 10:	ASH Press Release of 6th October 1998: "WHO passive smoking study - tobacco industry and Sunday Telegraph disinformation nailed."
Appendix 11:	Sunday Telegraph articles of 11th October 1998: Copy no longer exists "Study fails to link passive smoking with cancer" "Suspending the rules of science"
Appendix 12:	Press Complaints Commission Adjudication
Appendix 13:	Sunday Telegraph articles of 25th October 1998: "Complaint over article on passive smoking is rejected" "When scientific fashion goes up in smoke"
Appendix 14:	Letter to the Editor of the Sunday Telegraph regarding passive smoking and the WHO study
Appendix 15:	Open letter to Press Complaint Commission members from ASH Copy no longer exists
Appendix 16	April 200, a damning analysis of tobacco industry manipulation of the IARC passive smoking and lung cancer study publish in the medical journal, The Lancet

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