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The Sunday Telegraph

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DIRECT LINE: FAX:

Mrs Susan Roberts,
Press Complaints Commission,
1 Salisbury Square,
London EC4Y 8AE

21 May 1998

Dear Mrs Roberts,

Ref: 980522

In responding to the complaint by Mr Clive Bates on behalf of ASH we are, of course, well aware of the very intense feeling generated by any clash between pro- and anti-smoking interests and that both like to extract from such a clash the maximum advantage to themselves. While we have certainly exercised our right to comment on the issues, we are here concerned only with answering the specific criticism of our reporters' coverage.

We are challenged essentially on two points:

- 1) Our contention that the World Health Organisation "withheld" the findings of its research; and
- 2) Our interpretation of the findings.

As to the first point, WHO's own internal biennial report published only a short abstract of the passive smoking study with no publicity - which might reasonably have been expected for the results of Europe's biggest such study. The Organisation's explanation that the findings had been submitted to a scientific journal - subsequently repeated many times - was plainly reported in The Sunday Telegraph's original story of 8 March.

The Press Complaints Commission will note that our report did *not* say that the findings had been "suppressed" - although that specific misrepresentation has subsequently been made by the WHO.

In the circumstances we stand by our use of the word "withheld" which we do not and did not consider misleading or inaccurate.

On the question of interpretation, we have been fiercely attacked for misrepresenting or misunderstanding the WHO statistics.

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Specifically, we have been challenged on the headline "Passive smoking does not cause cancer - official", and on our interpretation of the WHO finding of an odds ratio (OR) of lung cancer among non-smokers in its study of 1.16, with a 95 per cent confidence interval (CI) of 0.93 to 1.44.

Our justification of both the headline and the article itself rests on a sound foundation of statistical inference theory. We have been taken to task for not focusing on the "headline" OR figure of 1.16 - which suggests a 16 per cent greater risk among non-smokers. However, as any competent statistician will attest, it is impossible to judge the importance of that headline figure without consideration of the lower bound of the 95 per cent CI. If this lower bound encompasses an OR of 1.0, then the probability that the headline figure is the product of fluke alone exceeds 1 in 20, and the result is deemed "statistically non-significant". This is the case with the WHO's findings, whose lower bound falls considerably below the crucial cut-off required for significance.

The failure of large and careful studies to find statistically significant effects has routinely been used by the medical profession to dismiss other supposed health risks, from breast implants to living close to overhead powerlines. Thus in using the headline "Passive smoking does not cause cancer - official", we were following a practice widely adopted by the medical profession to sum up findings by official bodies such as the WHO on other health risks. Had a similar headline been used to sum up the findings of a study into a far less controversial health risk, we suspect there would have been no complaint whatsoever.

Our justification for the article itself is similar; despite being the largest and most careful yet carried out in Europe, the WHO study failed to find a significant extra cancer risk from passive smoking. So large a study is especially likely to detect even small risks; its failure to do so on so controversial an issue demanded front-page treatment.

To deal with various other matters:

- 1) We have been accused of not providing adequate context, showing that the WHO results are in line with previous research. This is a fair criticism: the WHO results are indeed in line with previous studies - the bulk of which have *also* failed to reach statistical significance.
- 2) Victoria Macdonald made repeated attempts to contact officials of the WHO for comment, starting from the Thursday before the article appeared. None would discuss the article with her, for reasons unknown to us.
- 3) Both Victoria Macdonald and Robert Matthews resent the repeated innuendo that they are "dupes" of the tobacco industry. Their analysis of the WHO results and the content of both the initial article and all subsequent articles were in no way influenced by the tobacco industry.

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Smoking and health is, as I said earlier, an issue which arouses very strong feelings but we must reject Mr Bates' dismissal of our careful and detailed 15 March coverage as "evasive revisionism." And in taking exception to the reproduction of our 8 March headline he fails to notice, or to mention, that the same page contained a rag-out of The Daily Telegraph's 12 March lead heading "Scientists call for curbs on cigarettes; Smoking in the home 'kills babies'".

This was captioned "Who to believe? Our report (top) on the WHO study and The Daily Telegraph last Thursday."

In summary, we do not feel that we have in any way breached the Code of Practice of conduct. Our articles may not have been to the liking of an anti-smoking pressure group, or to scientists who have made their own anti-smoking stance clear on a number of occasions, but we stand by them unreservedly.

Yours sincerely,

HP 
Andrew Hutchinson
Ombudsman and Associate Editor

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