

ASH/ Passive smoking/ Re: PCC complaint about Sunday Telegraph

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Mr. Dominic Lawson
Editor
The Sunday Telegraph
1 Canada Square
Canary Wharf
London E14 5AR



16th April 1998

Dear Mr. Lawson

Re: PCC complaint about Sunday Telegraph coverage of passive smoking

Thank you for sending me your press statement regarding the above complaint. It is a great pity that you have continued to stand by the story in the face of a clear explanation of where you went wrong and outright dismissal of your interpretation of the WHO's study by the expert community. It is also regrettable that you have resorted to abuse in your press statement.

Just in case you are innocently mistaken, I think it is worth summarising why we believe your reporting of this issue is flawed. You say in your press statement: "*We stand by our original story reporting the findings of the World Health Organisation showing no statistically significant risk of cancer from passive smoking*". The headline of March 8th is rather different and states: "*Passive smoking doesn't cause cancer - official*". These two statements have completely different meanings. The first statement merely means that the authors of the study could not be 95% confident that the link they had detected between smoking and lung cancer was not caused by chance. The second suggests they have positively confirmed there is no risk - nothing could be further from the truth. These statements have entirely different meanings and to confuse them is an elementary error of logic on the part of the Sunday Telegraph. 'Statistical significance' is a measure of the confidence that the authors have in their findings, not of the magnitude of the risk detected, and I can only assume this is the source of the confusion. The statement you make in your press statement is easily misunderstood if the formal statistical meaning of the word 'significance' is not clear. The statement in your headline, however, is straightforward, unambiguous and wrong. As I hope you now know, the authors of the study have said that your reporting is in "*sharp contrast*" to what their study actually shows. You have yet to explain why they are wrong and you are right about their study.

It is wrong for you to accuse us of trying to "*whip up panic and hysteria by stating, without the required evidence, that non-smokers can develop lung cancer from contact with smokers*". We are not trying to whip up hysteria, nor have we ever said that the WHO study in isolation amounts to conclusive evidence of a link. It is the Sunday Telegraph that argues, wrongly, that this study provides conclusive evidence of no link. Three days after your article was published the Government's Scientific Committee on Tobacco and Health stated "*exposure to environmental tobacco smoke is a cause of lung cancer, and in those with long term exposure, the increased risk is 20-30%*." Our complaint is, in any case, not about the health impacts of passive smoking, but about the way the Sunday Telegraph misreported the particular WHO study.

To accuse ASH of 'shooting the messenger' is unfair coming from a newspaper with your good reputation, circulation and weight. As a newspaper you do have a responsibility to be

accurate and not to misrepresent the study or the conclusions drawn by its authors. The real 'message' of this study actually adds to the evidence in favour of a link between passive smoking and lung cancer - even if it is not definitive proof of a link in isolation. You have reported the opposite of this and, as 'the messenger', the Sunday Telegraph should be held responsible for distorting and inverting the message. We are not reacting because the "*result is clearly not the one desired by ASH*", but because the actual result is not what the Sunday Telegraph has reported.

ASH believe that you are doing a disservice to your readers and we are not surprised that at least one of them has written a letter, which you published, based on a misunderstanding of the facts and of our complaint about the Sunday Telegraph's reporting.

Yours sincerely,

Clive Bates
Director

Registered Charity No 262067

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