Summary report of the Australian National Council on Drugs’ media project

Introduction:

The Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) believes it is important that there is some effort to increase the level of sophistication and accuracy in the reporting of alcohol and other drug (AOD) related issues in the media.

While there are many examples of accurate and responsible media coverage of AOD issues, unfortunately there are many more illustrations of misrepresentation and overly sensational reporting that reinforces stigma and detracts from informed public debate.

In recognising the value of the media as a public education and public opinion tool, the ANCD commissioned the School of Professional Communication at the University of Canberra to establish a key set of principles for the AOD sector, and for journalists and editors, for the responsible, accurate and ethical reporting of AOD issues.

Methodology:

The project involved monitoring news coverage of prominent AOD issues throughout the timeframe of the study; reviewing the current research literature on the extent, nature and portrayal of drug issues by the mass news media; reviewing existing media guidelines and similar resources on the reporting and portrayal of AOD issues; and reviewing the Australian Government’s media guidelines on the reporting of suicide and mental illness for comparative purposes.

Consultation with editors and journalists was undertaken about the reporting and portrayal of AOD issues in everyday professional practice, their understanding of current media guidelines, and their responses to concerns and criticism about their reporting practices.

Representatives of the AOD sector were also consulted about news reporting and portrayal of AOD issues, their perceptions and understanding of contemporary reporting practices, and exploration of specific concerns about such practices. Drug users and carers were also consulted about their perceptions and understanding of contemporary reporting practices, and any specific concerns about such practices.

Finally, small reference groups of journalists and AOD sector representatives were established to discuss the themes and issues identified in individual consultations. As a result, roles and responsibilities, and practical strategies were documented in a final report that may assist both the media and AOD sector to improve media coverage of drug issues.

Findings:

The media is diverse, consisting of a range of genres with its own imperatives for what makes a good news story about AOD issues. There are significant differences in reporting and portrayal of AOD issues; for example, between radio news and radio talk-back, television news and television current affairs, and between news in the news sections of newspapers and opinion columns.
Prominent news stories that were monitored in both metropolitan and regional press, and broadcast media, often lacked sufficient context. The stories promoted stereotypical representations of illicit drugs and their effects, of drug users, of the relationships between drug use and crime, or used inappropriate language and did not provide helpline contact information. Some journalists thought it was often difficult to talk to the AOD sector about research, new treatments, policy, etc. because of the complexity of the issues and the language used. Journalists and their editors had to write a story and make it easily understandable to a wider public.

In contrast, there were several news reports by particular radio programs, and by medical and social affairs reporters in metropolitan newspapers that present accurate and responsible reporting. Such examples could serve as a template for others in the news media and are often the result of personal contacts and professional relationships between the AOD sector and media representatives.

While the AOD sector is unified in its desire to improve health, social and economic outcomes by preventing and reducing the harmful effects of AOD in Australian society, the sector is also diverse and represents a variety of viewpoints and policies but values and utilises the media as an important dissemination mechanism for informing and educating the community about AOD issues.

The media’s value was evidenced through this project’s identification of the now more widely reported effects of tobacco and alcohol, as opposed to illicit drugs, reflecting in part social and cultural change and the work of the AOD sector. Unfortunately there was little evidence of the inter-relatedness (comorbidity) of drug issues and other medical and health issues, and social issues, in news media coverage. The exception to this is where a ‘public crisis’ emerged, for example, the 2005 media coverage of cannabis use and subsequent mental illness. The AOD sector clearly has a role to play to ensure these issues are bought to the attention of; and then accurately and responsibly represented by the media.

The print media, particularly newspapers, are bound to comply with the reporting standards reflected in the Australian Press Council’s (APC) Guidelines on Drugs and Drug Addiction. The APC’s guidelines are an excellent premise for reporting AOD issues and are endorsed by the ANCD as the standard by which all media reporting should be measured.

The APC’s reporting guidelines (2001)* state:

- “Responsibly report public debate about drug use and addiction;
- The harmful effects of any particular drug should not be exaggerated or minimised;
- Avoid detailed accounts of consumption methods, even though many young people are generally familiar with them;
- Outlining the chemical composition of a drug may be justified in some reports, but avoid providing any details which could assist its manufacture;
- Do not quote the lethal dose of any particular drug;
- Guard against any reporting which might encourage readers’ experimentation with a drug, for example highlighting the ‘glamour’ of the dangers involved;
- Highlight elements of a story which convey the message that preventive measures against drug abuse do exist, and that people can be protected from the harmful consequences of their addictive behaviours;
- Bear in mind the arguments of those who point out that tobacco and alcohol use and addiction are another major aspect of the drug story.”

* See <http://www.presscouncil.org.au/pcsite/activities/guides/gpr246_2.html>
There is little recognition within the media or AOD sector of the APC’s guidelines. Promotion and extension of the guidelines to other media genres, supported by continuing personal contacts with media professionals and media industry groups, provides an opportunity to build on an already existing platform to improve reporting of AOD issues.

**Recommendations and Next Steps:**

The following recommendations resulted from the study undertaken by the School of Professional Communication at the University of Canberra and are endorsed by the ANCD as practical strategies that could be progressed to improve drug reporting.

- Actively promote the media guidelines developed by the Australian Press Council on ‘Drugs and Drug Addiction’ and state publicly that this is a standard by which Australian media should be held accountable.
- Extend the guidelines to recognise that care should be taken in the use of media labels and language used to describe people using illicit drugs. ‘Drug user’ and or ‘injecting drug user’ are the preferred descriptions rather than the various ‘street’ labels.
- Write to all Australian radio and television newsrooms stating that the AOD sector endorses the Australian Press Council’s guidelines and that it is through these guidelines that it holds broadcasters accountable.
- The National Drug and Alcohol Awards Committee should consider collaborating with the Walkley Awards to promote excellence in drugs issues reporting.
- Consider gaining support for the development of a website (along the lines of SANE Australia’s Stigma Watch for mental illness) that tracks good and bad journalistic practice in reporting and portraying drugs and drug issues.
- Consider gaining support for funding the development of an education resource kit detailing journalistic best practice in drugs issues reporting and portrayal (similar to the Response Ability resource produced by kit developed by the NSW Hunter Institute of Mental Health for reporting mental health issues).
- Further explore the impact of the portrayals of alcohol and drug issues in fictional media genres, especially television and cinema.