

Media reporting on drug and alcohol issues

To: The Chief-of-Staff



From: The Australian National Council on Drugs (with the support of the Australian Press Council)

Re: Media reporting on drug and alcohol issues

I am writing to you to firstly thank the media for helping to raise awareness on drug and alcohol issues. It is very important that Australians are informed about this range of issues in a sensitive and responsible way.

The Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) and the Australian Press Council (APC) have teamed together to provide some guidelines and suggestions we would ask you to circulate to your newsroom staff.

A couple of years ago the ANCD commissioned a media project to look at alcohol and other drug related issues in the media. The research clearly showed that there were many examples of very responsible and accurate media coverage with these issues. However, there were also some clear illustrations of either misrepresentation or somewhat overly dramatic reporting – which in our view – can potentially reinforce stigma and undermine informed public debate.

A summary of the School of Professional Communication at the University of Canberra report prepared for the ANCD has been attached with this document for your consideration.

People with drug and alcohol problems are often facing and dealing with significant personal issues and problems and it's vital that this is borne in mind when reporting on such issues. There are also many other people in their life that can be adversely affected by inappropriate or inaccurate media reports. In particular, consideration should be given to the potential impact on small and discrete communities, such as remote Indigenous communities where inappropriate media reporting of a drug and alcohol problem may be used to identify actual individuals and families.

Another key thought we would like to pass on is that whenever you are doing a drug and alcohol story, it would be ideal for you to offer a helpline contact as part of the story. Obviously people with drug and alcohol issues, and their families and friends often want to know how they can get help.

Additionally, the ANCD is always happy to discuss these matters with you and connect you to a range of experts. The ANCD can also suggest helpline contact information if you need it. The review clearly shows many media outlets do a good job and both the ANCD and APC would like to further promote responsible and accurate media reporting on alcohol and other drug issues.

The Australian Press Council's guidelines on drugs and drug addiction are an excellent premise for reporting and both Councils endorse these guidelines, which are as follows:

- Media should report public debate about drug use and addiction responsibly.
- In any reports the harmful affects of any particular drug should not be either exaggerated or minimised.
- Media should avoid detailed accounts of consumption methods (even though many young people are often familiar with them).

- Media should be aware that outlining the chemical composition of a drug may well be justified in a report, but you should avoid providing any details which can help people understand how to manufacture it.
- Media should not quote the lethal dose of any particular drug in reports.
- Media should guard against any reporting which might encourage a person to experiment with a drug.
- Media should consider highlighting elements of a story which clearly convey that preventative measures against drug abuse do exist – and that people can be actually protected from the harmful consequences of addictive behaviour.
- Media should bear in mind the arguments of people that point out that tobacco and alcohol use and addiction are another major aspect of the drugs story.

Please visit http://www.presscouncil.org.au/pcsite/activities/guides/gpr246_2.html to see the full APC guidelines.

Please visit www.ancd.org.au to see the [full media report](#) commissioned by the ANCD.

Thank you for taking the time to read this memorandum. The media plays a critical role in Australia in getting information to people who need it and it is hoped that this role can be further enhanced by strengthening our commitment to responsible and accurate reporting of drug and alcohol issues.

Yours sincerely

Dr John Herron
Chairman
Australian National Council on Drugs

April 2007

The ANCD is the principal advisory body to Government on drug and alcohol issues.