

Advisory Notice to all editors, national and local

The Office of the Press Ombudsman has been approached about the impact of language used in newspaper articles on the subject matter of drug-users. The approach has been made by the Union for Improved Services, Communication and Education (UISCE) which is linked to the Drugs and Alcohol Task Force which is responsible for developing a National Drugs Strategy. Further information is available on its website (www.myuisce.org).

UISCE in a submission to this office states

Stigma is a contributing barrier to equality encountered by people who use drugs. language and imagery used to describe addiction by the media contributes to the stigma.

The outcome of using this language is a lowering in the self-esteem of people who use drugs, shame from family and friends and increased social isolation – all of which are barriers to recovery and reintegration.

Inaccurate and crude misunderstandings of drugs have fed through into how people who use drugs are seen: the widely-held, generalising, and unscientific position that illicit drugs are ‘bad’ informs the understanding that people who use drugs are bad too.

Drug use is viewed as unacceptable and criminal, therefore people who use drugs, by default, are stigmatised as deviant criminals. In terms of drug use, stigma and criminalisation operate together: stigma (i.e. the social spoiling of people who use drugs) is used to discourage drug use, and criminalisation is justified by stigmatising drugs and people who use them.

Stigmatisation drives frequent prejudiced and biased treatment of people who use drugs. This discrimination has corresponding impacts on health and welfare. Stigma, and the discrimination it results in, are what drive the gross violations of the human rights of people who use drugs, and also result in these violations going for the most part unchallenged.”

UISCE has provided a sample of the terms which they feel demean and stigmatise people who are drug-users. These include *Junkie, Zombie, Druggie, Stoner, Scum, Crackhead*. UISCE also request that in reporting on stories about drug usage people’s names are given before their condition (in a similar way as people with disabilities are described in reports)

UISCE have asked this office to pass on the above remarks to editors of national and local newspapers. This Advisory Notice is issued as a service to UISCE and without prejudice to any decision that may be made in the event of a complaint to this office about the reporting of drug-related issues.

Yours sincerely

Peter Feeney

Press Ombudsman

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