

**2019-51: Clohessy vs St. Catharines Standard**

*July 22, 2019*

The National NewsMedia Council reviewed and found corrective action was taken on an April 18, 2019 article, "Probation for man who was caught with fentanyl at border," published in the St. Catharines Standard.

The article reported the conviction and sentencing of an individual who was found in possession of the drug fentanyl. It stated that four officers with the Canada Border Services Agency "became ill after being exposed to an unknown substance during an inspection of a vehicle at the Fort Erie border crossing on June 2, 2017."

The article subsequently noted the illegal substances found in the individual's possession included fentanyl, and provided a description of the drug, stating as fact that "Fentanyl is a powerful and potentially lethal opioid that can be absorbed through the skin."

Patrick Clohessy complained that the article's statement that fentanyl "can be absorbed through the skin" is misleading in that it is contradicted by current scientific and medical knowledge and other law enforcement standards. The complainant cited several sources to support his argument that contradict possible overexposure to the drug through brief, accidental skin contact.

The complainant also argued that the article presents information in such a manner that leads readers into thinking that passive contact with fentanyl caused law enforcement agents to fall ill.

The news organization stated that the April 2019 article was based on original reporting of a June 2017 incident that led to the conviction. It rejected the argument that the article reported statements in such a way that leads readers to believe that passive contact with fentanyl caused law enforcement agents to fall ill. Instead, it stated, "The cause of their illness is not explicitly determined in the story."

However, in response to the complaint, the news organization added information to the article, citing the Border Service Agency as the source of information that "officers became ill after being exposed" to an unknown substance.

It also acknowledged that information about absorption and level of hazard posed by exposure to fentanyl may be changing, and added a statement to that effect in the article. It also added a link to current RCMP policy for first responders dealing with possible fentanyl exposure.

Attribution provides essential context about the origin of information reported in a story. The additional statement and the information link provides context that alerts the reader to differing opinions and

changing knowledge about fentanyl exposure and protection. In this case, the corrective action to add attribution tells readers the source of a statement reported as fact and helps readers to assess the credibility of that information.

Earlier reports may have been accepted as true at the time, and information that is readily available now may contradict earlier reporting. The role of the NNC is not to determine the accuracy of one position or another on scientific facts. Best practice is to include warnings to the reader that information on articles published in previous years may be out of date.

The NNC finds that adding attribution of statements and acknowledging changes in protocol around fentanyl exposure are appropriate corrective actions that provide clarification and opportunity for readers to evaluate the veracity of information from sources. Further, proper attribution prevents perpetuating misleading or outdated information that risks stigmatizing a vulnerable sector of the population.

The complainant argued that sensationalist reporting “about police ‘overdosing’ from exposure to small amounts of fentanyl” further stigmatizes and endangers drug users, as it could deter people from responding to an individual suffering from a potentially fatal drug overdose.

The NNC does not deal with trends in reporting and therefore declines to comment on incidence of sensationalism in general. While concerned about the impact of information that could stigmatize vulnerable people, the NNC accepts the news organization’s view that this particular article was not sensational.