

**2019-61 Soper vs Hamilton Spectator**

*August 7, 2019 – for immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council (NNC) has considered and dismissed a complaint about the inclusion of past criminal charges, since stayed, against an individual featured in a July 16, 2019, column published in the Hamilton Spectator.

The feature-length column, “Injured girl denied insurance claim due to province’s bureaucratic glitch”, examines the complex bureaucratic and legal challenges faced by a local mother, Sharon Hill, as she and her family sought medical rehabilitation compensation for her daughter following a devastating injury.

In her submission, the complainant, Zoe Soper, argued that the inclusion of the past criminal charges against Hill were “unethical” and lacked sensitivity because they had been stayed. Moreover, she said the charges against Hill were not relevant to the issue of medical insurance and compensation, which was the column’s primary focus.

In its response, the news organization responded by affirming that the column in question was labelled as ‘opinion’, and as such, columnists should be afforded wide latitude to express their own perspectives and views. The news organization, moreover, stated the charges against Hill were part of the public record, and that proper care had been taken to ensure the details about the charges were described in appropriate context. An omission of the past charges against Hill, they said, would have been both irresponsible and not transparent.

In reviewing the complaint, the NewsMedia Council considered the journalistic standard that news reports and opinion columns should be fair, accurate, and provide relevant context for readers.

While the column in question does address many of the technical and legalistic elements of the health care system, it recognized that the focus on Hill, and her family, was critically important to bring this complex issue to a tangible, real life, situation.

The NNC is cognizant that, in a digital age, news organizations must exhibit care when reporting on individuals who, willingly or not, become the subject of public spotlight. In order to minimize the possibility of causing undue harm and long-term damage to the reputation of these individuals, news organizations should exercise editorial discretion with both rigor and responsibility.

In its consideration of the complainant’s concerns about the fairness of repeating past criminal charges, Council noted that Hill has been a subject of several reports over the past two years by the Hamilton Spectator. A basic search of Hill’s name in the respondent’s archives, for example, yields four stories with the following datelines: [September 27, 2017](#); [November 27, 2017](#); [March 15, 2018](#); and [July 24, 2018](#). Council also notes that Hill’s criminal charges were covered by a series of other news outlets.

In light of this fact, Council supports the view of the news organization that the inclusion of the past charges in the column provided relevant context for readers.

In its review of the column, Council also noted that the news organization did include hyperlinked text to a story that described why the charges against Hill had been stayed. This falls in line with current industry best practice and does not constitute a breach of journalistic standards.

Lastly, the complainant took issue with how the news organization chose to introduce Hill, and the charges, since stayed, to readers. Council recommends stating that this concern is an issue of editorial presentation and declines to comment on the matter as it extends beyond the NNC's mandate.