

2021-51 Blair/various v Toronto Sun

June 11, 2021

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed with reservation a complaint about accuracy in a May 14, 2021 opinion article, “Family left with questions after Brampton senior’s death,” published by the Toronto Sun.

The opinion article told the story of an individual who died after receiving a vaccination against COVID-19. The column calls for a coroner’s inquest into the individual’s death, which was attributed to COVID-19. It includes statements from the deceased individual’s son.

Twelve individuals filed complaints with the National NewsMedia Council about the column.

Complainants expressed concern about the lack of evidence to support the association between the individual’s vaccination and his death. Several complainants worried that the column would lead readers to be more reluctant to receive the vaccine out of fear of possible adverse effects. Some complainants also cited concern with the original headline and URL, “Man, 75, listened to politicians, got vaccinated, died five days later.”

One complaint was selected as representative of the concerns raised, in accordance with standard process when the NNC receives multiple complaints about the same issues in a particular article.

Like the majority of complainants, Kate Blair was concerned about the lack of evidence linking the man’s death and his vaccination. She argued there was clear evidence suggesting otherwise. In particular, she was concerned with statements from the individual’s son suggesting that either the vaccine contributed to his father’s death or that he may have contracted COVID-19 at the vaccination site.

The complainant emphasized the potential impact of statements made in the column on the wider public, arguing: “This piece will lead to many deaths of readers who will avoid getting the COVID vaccine.”

The news organization responded by stating, “The issue of vaccine side effects and the question of to what degree they are or are not happening in those who receive vaccines is something that has been

discussed by government officials and medical advisors and widely covered in most media outlets in Canada.”

The news organization also stated that articles reporting on events following vaccinations may take a variety of forms and angles, ranging from reporting on statistics to stories that “unpack the questions and concerns regarding an individual narrative,” including the article at hand.

While it rejected the complainant’s argument that the opinion article would directly “lead to many deaths,” the Toronto Sun offered the complainant the opportunity to write a letter to the editor to express her perspective on the matter.

The complainant declined the offer of a letter to the editor, viewing it as insufficient remedy. She stated that while she agrees that debates about the danger and effectiveness of vaccines are important, “the entire framing, argument and implication of the article is that this man's death was a result of either the vaccine or him contracting COVID during vaccination - two points at odds with the information in the article itself.”

The complainant pointed out that the timeline described in the column was inconsistent with known vaccine-related adverse effects, such as an allergic reaction or blood clotting, or with viral incubation, had the individual contracted COVID from the vaccination site, as suggested by quotes in the article.

In further correspondence, the news organization informed the NNC that the original headline had been changed “soon after publication to better reflect the contents of the story.”

The NNC supports the wide latitude afforded to opinion columnists to express unpopular opinions and challenge the status quo. This includes the ability to ask pointed questions, and to advocate for specific action or widespread change.

The NNC has consistently stated that the journalistic standard of accuracy also applies to opinion columns. While it holds that opinions must be grounded in fact, the NNC is also of the view that the failure to convince readers of a particular argument is not in itself a breach of standards.

Journalists have the prerogative to choose their sources and select quotes relevant to the story, so long as those quotes are accurately stated in context. It is common practice to include individual perspectives when reporting on facts and figures to provide context and offer elements of human interest.

The NNC accepts that the original headline was updated to provide a more accurate description of the article, and supports the change.

The NNC cautions against amplifying opinions or assumptions that are not supported by verifiable evidence, particularly when they may have widespread negative consequences for public health and safety.

At the same time, the NNC also recognizes that the role of opinion writers is varied, sometimes taking the form of analysis or advocacy, or highlighting views not held by the majority, for the purpose of furthering public debate.

In reviewing the article in question, the NNC observed that the opinion column calls for a deeper examination into the death of the individual. It largely centres on the perspective of the individual's son, who is dealing with the death of his father. The individual's statements about the cause of death are framed as his perspective and attributed accordingly.

In considering the complaint, however, Council expressed concern that the speculative statements attributed to the individual's son were presented without scrutiny, and were left largely unaddressed by the columnist. For example, the column failed to acknowledge the widely-accepted public health information about the timeframe of viral incubation or the appearance of COVID-19 symptoms ranging from two to 14 days. Best practice suggests that the addition of relevant information would allow readers to assess claims made by the individual quoted in the story.

That said, the NNC observed that the columnist does not state that the vaccine was the cause of death, but does call for more information about the death. The column includes statistics from Health Canada about deaths investigated following vaccinations and notes that the individual's death in this case was attributed to COVID-19. Readers may draw their own conclusions based on this information.

Readers may disagree with the suggestions and opinions put forth by the individual quoted in the story. Readers may also disagree with the conclusions drawn by the columnist, in particular, that there should be further investigation into the death of the individual.

While best practice suggests that more information would help readers make informed decisions based on scientific fact, Council supported the view that the opinion presented in the column fell within the wide latitude afforded to opinion columnists to contribute to a public forum with a range of viewpoints. For this reason, Council dismissed the complaint about accuracy with the above-mentioned reservation.