



THE INTERNATIONAL HARM REDUCTION ASSOCIATION AND OTHERS AND THE IRISH INDEPENDENT

The Press Ombudsman has decided to uphold a complaint made jointly by the International Harm Reduction Association, the Irish Needle Exchange Forum and the CityWide Drugs Crisis Campaign, supported by a number of Irish drug service providers and professionals, that an article published in the Irish Independent on 18 February 2011 breached Principle 8 (Prejudice) of the Code of Practice for Newspapers and Magazines because it was likely to cause grave offence to or stir up hatred against individuals or groups addicted to drugs on the basis of their illness.

There was insufficient evidence to enable the Press Ombudsman to make a decision on whether or not the article breached Principle 1.1 of the Code.

The article was headlined “Sterilising junkies may seem harsh, but it does make sense”, and commented favourably on a suggestion by a doctor that such people should be offered money to be sterilised. It described a group of people whose anti-social activities the writer had witnessed from his taxi as “junkies” and “feral, worthless scumbags”, and voiced the writer’s opinion that “if every junkie in this country were to die tomorrow I would cheer”.

The complainants said that the article breached Principle 8 of the Code, and sought a formal apology and reasonable right of reply from the newspaper.

The newspaper responded that while it steadfastly supported the right of its commentators to write robustly and without fear or favour, it recognised that a right of reply would be appropriate, and offered to publish a letter to the editor from the complainants, as it had done in response to a number of other complaints about the article. It subsequently advised the Press Ombudsman that it had also published a major feature about a mother’s struggle in coping with her child’s drug

addiction, which it said was a direct response to another complaint about the article from another organization. The complainants turned down the newspaper's offer to publish a letter from them to the editor, and said that the feature that was published bore no relationship to and was irrelevant to their complaint.

The Preamble to the Code of Practice states clearly that publications are entitled to publish what they consider to be news without fear or favour, and to comment on it. This is not at issue as long as the relevant parameters of the Code of Practice - which has been written by editors and which is interpreted and applied by the Press Ombudsman and the Press Council - are also observed. Neither the justification advanced in the article for the comments complained about – an unconvincing distinction between “junkie” and “addict” – nor the subsequent publication by the newspaper of letters from other complainants, or the publication of a feature reacting to the article, can obviate the need to make it clear that this article represents a breach of Principle 8 of the Code. In these circumstances, the complaint under this Principle is upheld.

23 May 2011