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Ian Beales  
Editors' Code Committee Secretary  
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20 January 2011

Dear Mr Beales,

#### **Annual Review of the Code— a submission from the UK Drug Policy Commission**

I am writing in my role as Chair of the UK Drug Policy Commission to ask the Code Committee to consider whether the Code and associated guidance might be strengthened to cover prejudicial and pejorative references to people recovering from drug dependency and addiction problems.

We have been struck by how the media, and press reporting especially, has increasingly become an important positive influence on public understanding of the problems of stigma associated with mental illness and disability. As you will know, I was privileged to be a member of the PCC during the period when Clause 12 of the Code was extended to include reference to mental illness and disability and this has played an important part in the change in press reporting. Other positive comparisons can also be drawn with the improvements to the Code and guidance in relation to suicides and HIV/AIDS.

The treatment and reintegration into society of people with drug dependency problems and addictions has become both a societal and governmental priority over the past 20 years as the scale of the problem has grown. However, social stigma acts as a significant barrier, particularly because the condition is often associated with acts which might be deemed illegal. However, as the World Health Organisation has observed, *"Substance dependence is a complex disorder with biological mechanisms affecting the brain and its capacity to control substance use. It is not only determined by biological and genetic factors, but psychological, social, cultural and environmental factors as well... dependence is not a failure of will or of strength of character but a medical disorder that could affect any human being. Dependence is a chronic and relapsing disorder, often co-occurring with other physical and mental conditions."*<sup>1</sup>

In order to provide hard data on the extent of societal stigma towards recovering drug users, the UKDPC has undertaken research exploring public attitudes towards people with drug dependency problems, based on similar surveys about mental health. The findings, summarised in the accompanying evidence Overview *"Getting serious about stigma: the problem with stigmatizing drug users"*, illustrate the challenges and barriers that those with drug problems face. They show that 64% of people felt that "People with a history of drug dependence are too often demonised in the media".

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation (2004) "Neuroscience of psychoactive substance use & dependence", WHO: Geneva. p247-248

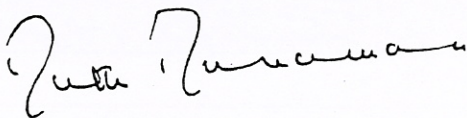
Our research also included a study examining the way in which drug users are portrayed in print. This study, undertaken by the Loughborough Media Communications Research Centre, looked at all items (in total over 6,000) that mentioned drug use or drug users in a sample of eight leading newspapers in 1995, 2002 and 2009. The overall conclusion was that reporting of drug use is dominated by themes of crime and celebrity and may use pejorative language that frames the public understanding of drug dependency. The report of the findings is also enclosed. We also carried out extensive focus groups with recovering drug users and their families. This provides a rich picture of how pervasive stigmatization is and how pejorative reporting can undermine attempts at recovery.

In view of this new evidence we ask the Code of Practice Committee to consider three actions:

- (i) Clarify whether the existing provisions of Clause 12 of the Code sufficiently encompass prejudicial or pejorative references to individuals with substance misuse dependency or addiction problems.
- (ii) While the Committee may be reluctant to add yet another category such as 'Addictions', the evidence to do so is powerful. We hope it might be possible to strengthen The Editors' Codebook so that the Guidance notes specifically mention that existing clauses of the code cover references to physical, mental health and addictions which should only be mentioned when relevant.
- (iii) Following a recent meeting with national newspaper editors, the Society of Editors and the PCC, the UKDPC is working with the SoE to help produce advice about such reporting. We would welcome the opportunity to dovetail that with a potential revision to the Codebook.

The press has made a major contribution to better public understanding and attitudes to mental health issues. Our knowledge about the causes of drug dependency and addiction are also improving, yet public attitudes and the nature of media reporting, about individuals struggling with the condition, lags behind.

Yours sincerely,



**Dame Ruth Runciman (Chair)**  
**UK Drug Policy Commission**

Enclosures:

- *Getting Serious About Stigma: the problem with stigmatising drug users. An Overview*
- *Representations of Drug Use and Drug Users in the British Press: A Content Analysis of Newspaper Coverage*
- *Attitudes to Drug Dependence: Results from a Survey of People Living in Private Households in the UK*