

## Examine press coverage of illegal drugs, Leveson urged

- The Leveson Inquiry should examine how press coverage of some illicit drug use can undermine political commitment to evidence-based drug policy.
- UKDPC calls on Inquiry to consider guidelines to address reporting of provisional information about possible harms of drugs.
- UKDPC calls for revisions to Clause 12 of Press Complaints Commission Code of Practice

The Leveson Inquiry should look at how the press covers illicit drug use, according to the UK Drug Policy Commission (UKDPC). In a submission published today, the independent Commission calls on the Inquiry to examine the influence on government policymaking of press coverage of controlled drugs and drug users.

UKDPC warns that the way some news about drugs is covered can create unnecessary pressure on policymakers to take policy decisions that are not supported by evidence.

In the submission, UKDPC identifies several examples of the influence of press stories on government drug policy. These include the response to mephedrone (known as “meow meow”), where inaccurate claims of deaths and serious injuries increased pressure on politicians and advisers to bring in legal controls over the drug, before reliable evidence was available.

The Commission also warns about the impact of some press coverage of people with drug dependency problems. Some reporting may fuel stigma experienced by those seeking to rebuild their lives, and their families, with consequences for their efforts to recover from addiction.

UKDPC recommends that preliminary information, such as speculation about possible causes of deaths where drugs are thought to be involved, should only be reported with clear indications that the information is provisional. The Commission also proposes that police should avoid commenting in the press about possible causes of death where drugs may be implicated, until the results of toxicology tests are available.

Other recommendations in the submission include:

- Greater recognition of the status of government drug advisers as independent experts who may be expected to disagree at times with government policy.
- Revising the Press Complaints Commission Code of Practice so that any individual may make a complaint under Clause 12, regardless of whether or not they are the subject of the story or exhibit similar characteristics to the subject.
- Lifting the restriction that Clause 12 applies only to individuals, and not to groups, so that prejudicial or pejorative references towards a category of people are subject to similar controls as references towards named individuals.

Roger Howard, Chief Executive of the UK Drug Policy Commission, said: “In covering drugs, the press get a lot right, but some reporting could be better. On a few occasions, the press

has built up so much pressure on politicians that there has been little chance to think about the possible negative consequences of new policies.

“It would be very welcome for the Leveson Inquiry to look at how press coverage affects drug policymaking, as well as perceptions of people who are trying to recover from drug addiction.”

**Notes to editors:**

Interviews are available on request. Please contact: Leo Barasi, [lbarasi@ukdpc.org.uk](mailto:lbarasi@ukdpc.org.uk), 020 7812 3792, 07988 054241.

The UK Drug Policy Commission is an independent charity that provides objective analysis of the evidence concerning drug policies and practice. Its principal funder is the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.