



Ms. E. Enkin, Ombudsman  
Canadian Broadcasting Corporation  
P.O. Box 500, Station A  
Toronto, Ontario. M5W 1E6

*via email*

5 December 2017

Dear Ms. Enkin,

We write as scientists, social scientists, clinicians and people with lived experience of substance use and its impacts who share the common desire for an effective evidence-based response to Canada's opioid overdose crisis. While we applaud much of the CBC's coverage of this ongoing emergency, we write to request the public broadcaster adopt non-stigmatizing language to refer to people who use illicit drugs. In light of recently-released statistics showing the magnitude of drug-related deaths in Canada this is a time-sensitive issue and change of language at the CBC needs to happen immediately. We have written to the CBC about this via the online submissions feature on their website but have not received a satisfactory response as to why this cannot be changed (e.g., "thank you for letting us know.")

Our research, as well as the work of many colleagues, bears out the fact that stigma and discrimination against people who use drugs plays an important role in fueling the overdose crisis. For example, we know that social disapproval and prejudice—by family, peers, and neighbours—makes people more likely to use drugs alone, out of reach of care in the event of an overdose. In British Columbia, more than 90% of overdose deaths during the public health crisis have occurred indoors, and 50% of these cases were among people using drugs alone in their private residences. Further, the use of stigmatizing language—e.g., addict, junkie, crackhead, etc.—by institutions and others with influence and power reinforces and legitimates this disapproval, lowering the likelihood an individual with a substance use disorder will engage with medical care. Beyond these pragmatic reasons, we believe that people living with addiction deserve an equal measure of care, support and compassion as anyone suffering from a chronic and debilitating disease. For people whose loved ones have died from overdose



and drug poisoning, or who are currently experiencing substance use disorders, hearing media describe them as “addicts” is particularly distressing.

We recognize that the CBC is not the only media outlet to have used stigmatizing language, such as “addict,” when referring to people who use drugs (See for example, articles and broadcasts referenced below.) We draw the use of these terms to your attention because of the corporation’s unique national standing and, in particular, we argue the following principles in the CBC’s Journalistic Standards and Practices apply to people who use drugs:

*We are aware of our influence on how minorities or vulnerable groups are perceived... We avoid generalizations, stereotypes, and any degrading or offensive words or images that could feed prejudice or expose people to hatred or contempt... When a minority group is referred to, the vocabulary is chosen with care and with consideration for changes in the language.*

In closing, we note your expertise and experience promoting the highest possible ethical standards at the CBC. We attach a recent report and infographic prepared by Dr. Jane Buxton (a signatory to this letter) and Hiep Tu of the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control on respectful language and stigma toward people who use drugs. We endorse their recommendations to reduce stigma, specifically:

1. Using people-first language before describing their behaviour or condition, e.g., “person with a cocaine-use disorder” rather than “cocaine addict”;
2. Use language that reflects the medical nature of substance use disorders;
3. Use language that promotes recovery;
4. Avoid slang or idioms, such as “dirty” or “clean” to refer to tests for drug use.

In June 2017, the Associated Press stylebook adopted person-first language to reduce bias and stigma in how journalists and media cover substance use and addiction, with specific recommendations to remove the terms “addict” and “drug abuser.” As Canada’s publicly-funded national broadcaster, we hope the CBC will similarly lead the way by adopting person-first language as well as urging the Canadian Press to adopt similar guidelines.

We would be eager to further discuss how the CBC could adopt non-stigmatizing language to refer to people who use drugs.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Respectfully,

M-J Milloy, PhD. BC Centre on Substance Use/University of British Columbia;  
Rebecca Haines-Saah, PhD. University of Calgary;  
Keith Ahamad, MD. BC Centre on Substance Use/ University of British Columbia;  
Jane Buxton, MD. BC Centre for Disease Control/ University of British Columbia;  
Kora DeBeck, PhD. BC Centre on Substance Use/ Simon Fraser University;  
Nadia Fairbairn, MD. BC Centre on Substance Use/ University of British Columbia;  
Kanna Hayashi, PhD. BC Centre on Substance Use/ Simon Fraser University;  
Elaine Hyshka, PhD. Royal Alexandra Hospital/ University of Alberta;  
Emily Jenkins, PhD, RN. University of British Columbia;  
Rod Knight, PhD. BC Centre on Substance Use/ University of British Columbia;  
Leslie McBain, BC Centre on Substance Use/ Moms Stop the Harm;  
Ryan McNeil, PhD. BC Centre on Substance Use/ University of British Columbia;  
Donna May, mumsDU;  
Seonaid Nolan, MD. BC Centre on Substance Use/ University of British Columbia;  
Lindsey Richardson, DPhil. BC Centre on Substance Use/ University of British Columbia;  
Petra Schulz, Moms Stop the Harm;  
Will Small, PhD. BC Centre on Substance Use/ Simon Fraser University;  
Lorna Thomas, Moms Stop the Harm;  
Ken Tupper, PhD. BC Centre on Substance Use/ University of British Columbia;  
Hakique Virani, MD. University of Alberta;  
Evan Wood, MD PhD. BC Centre on Substance Use/ University of British Columbia;

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## Supporting Examples

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November 09, 2017: 'If it hasn't happened ... it's coming': Mothers of addicts urge radical approach to fentanyl crisis (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/fentanyl-mothers-1.4384537>)

*Note: The term 'addict' was also used by CBC broadcasters in the same story featured on The National.*

November 09, 2017: Recovering addicts say shelter, services in Cambridge helped them survive (<http://www.cbc.ca/beta/news/recovering-addicts-say-shelter-services-in-cambridge-helped-them-survive-1.4394876>)

June 26, 2017: Manitoba helps addicts pay for opioid replacement Suboxone (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/suboxone-manitoba-pharmacare-opioids-1.4178035>)

June 6, 2017: Journalists, Stop Using Words Like Addict and Drug Abuser  
[http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/medical\\_examiner/2017/06/the\\_associated\\_press\\_removes\\_words\\_like\\_addict\\_and\\_drug\\_abuser.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2017/06/the_associated_press_removes_words_like_addict_and_drug_abuser.html)

June 11, 2017: Why We Should Say Someone Is A 'Person With An Addiction,' Not An Addict  
(<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/06/11/531931490/change-from-addict-to-person-with-an-addiction-is-long-overdue>)