

# Media & Language

## De-stigmatizing Language around Substance Use and Harm Reduction Reporting Project

### Final report to Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research

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BC Centre for Disease Control  
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THE UNIVERSITY  
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



MICHAEL SMITH FOUNDATION  
FOR HEALTH RESEARCH

## Media & Language: *De-stigmatizing language around substance use and harm reduction reporting project*

This report is prepared by Mashal Butt and Jane Buxton.

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The report is submitted on behalf of the core research team:

Jane Buxton; BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC), University of British Columbia (UBC) Principal Investigator

Travis Lupick; Journalist and author; Co-Investigator

Mashal Butt; Master's Student, School of Journalism, Writing and Media, UBC – Research Assistant. Performed the rapid literature evidence review and wrote the draft report and assisted in developing journalism student session

Jane Loh; MSc Student, UBC School of Population and Public Health, BC Centre for Substance Use, assisted in writing the report

Emily Rempel; BCCDC/University of Bath; Co-Supervised research assistant

Vivian Tsang; Medical Student, UBC faculty of Medicine; Developed question guide and led peer focus groups

The research team was assisted by Professionals for Ethical Engagement of Peers (PEEP) – Paul, Jess, Cheri, Charlene, Beth, and Jenny. We are so grateful for their insightful comments, engagement and consultation throughout this project.

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*The authors respectfully acknowledge that they work on the ancestral, traditional and unceded territories of the Coast Salish Peoples, including xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxw̓ u7mesh (Squamish), and Səlil̓ Iwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.*

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## **OVERVIEW OF THE MEDIA AND LANGUAGE PROJECT**

Media contributes to stigmatizing substance use by using stereotypical and harmful images and words to describe people who use substances. These descriptions create a damaging discourse that substance use is a public burden driven by crime and deviance, rather than a public health concern. Use of de-stigmatizing language in substance use reporting, can foster respect and positive public perceptions about people who use drugs, and may lead to improved policy intervention and advocacy.

We performed a rapid evidence literature review in which we identified no Canadian standards on substance use and harm reduction in news media reporting. We collated guidelines from other jurisdictions, and recommendations from a variety of sources. These findings were discussed in a focus group with people with lived and living experience of substance use (PWLLE), who shared personal experiences of the impact of stigmatizing language and images in media. The [final report](#) brings together the rapid evidence review, peer perspectives and makes recommendations about how to reduce stigma in the media.

In November 2020, an on-line Zoom seminar was developed to bring the content of the final report to University of British Columbia journalism students. A [presentation](#) included definitions of stigma, videos highlighting the impact of stigma on individuals who use substances, and key messages from a journalist and author who had spent time reporting on issues of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Small breakout sessions enabled students to ask questions and discuss stigma with representatives of [Professionals for Ethical Engagement of Peers \(PEEP\)](#). Finally PEEP shared their key messages for the journalism students. A post-session evaluation was performed and a [feedback report](#) was developed which incorporated input from both students and PEEP.

Karen Ward, a member of the Downtown Eastside community and advocate for people who use drugs was contracted to take non-stigmatizing images about substance use and harm reduction which will be made available for students to include in presentations and the media to include in newsprint and TV.

The final media and language report is posted on the [towardtheheart.com](#) website along with the presentation given to the students and feedback report of the session.

In January 2020, a hard copy of the report with a letter will be sent to 30+ local and national journalists and media outlets including print, radio, online and TV; the journalists will also receive an e-mail and link to the report and an offer to provide a session with PEEP to discuss the issues and findings of the project.

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## **OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT**

The main objectives of this study were to:

- conduct a rapid evidence literature review for resources and guides on substance use and harm reduction language for media (print, radio, TV, digital).
- assess the Canadian media landscape for existing standards set in place for journalists and editors on how to de-stigmatize reporting around substance use and harm reduction.
- summarize and evaluate the key themes in the identified resources and guides on best practice for substance use and harm reduction reporting.
- share and contextualize the perspectives of people with lived and living experience about the impact that the use of stigmatizing language and images in media has on the public and specifically on people who use drugs.
- disseminate the findings of the report by engaging journalism students and journalists through workshop events.
- disseminate the findings of the report to key journalists who work in the substance use and harm reeducating, and health reporting beat and to other media outlets.

## **THE RAPID EVIDENCE LITERATURE REVIEW**

We conducted a literature review in order to identify resources and guides, and existing standards in the Canadian media landscape. A traditional search engine such as Google Scholar was insufficient as it tends to yield primarily academic results and may miss media guides or resources. Therefore, a targeted database search was performed with the help of two librarians at the University of British Columbia (UBC). These identified three Boolean search strings using:

1. UBC Online Library - Summon
2. Google - Boolean Search
3. Google Advanced Search
4. DuckDuckGo - Boolean Search
5. Media Site Search

After removal of duplicates and irrelevant articles, 39 articles were reviewed

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### Key findings and recommendations:

1. There are currently no Canadian standards on substance use and harm reduction in news media reporting.
2. Best practice in substance use and harm reduction reporting should:
  - a. Move away from focusing on addiction as a matter of morality towards a more nuanced accumulation of biological, neurological and environmental factors. Viewing addiction as a matter of morality hinders preventive and rehabilitative policies and leads to discriminatory, enforcement focused measures.
  - b. Reframing addiction through the social determinants of health, as opposed to strictly as a disease or moral dilemma, considers the socio-structural environment that shapes substance use.
  - c. Use person-first language. This empowers individuals by focusing on their personhood, rather than their substance use.
  - d. Be cautious when sharing substance use and harm reduction narratives. Be wary of reporting on anything that may cause unnecessary harm to people with lived or living experience of substance use.
  - e. Ensure narratives do not exclusively focus on substance overdose and mortality as the sole issues surrounding substance use, and also include perspectives of recovery and contextual factors that shape substance use. This will provide a more balanced and realistic picture of substance use.
  - f. Avoid using stigmatizing imagery, exaggerated violence, criminalization, and overdose-related mortality. Media should not pathologize drug use, and instead, should incorporate the faces and stories of people who use drugs to communicate their real-world experiences.
3. Using de-stigmatizing language in substance use reporting fosters respect and creates a more positive public perception of people who use drugs. This, in turn, leads to improved policy intervention and advocacy.
4. Engagement of people with lived and living experience revealed that use of de-stigmatizing language result in feelings of empowerment and self-worth. They state that this has helped them make positive changes in their life.
5. De-stigmatizing language will take time. However, until a framework is established in principle, it cannot be widely implemented and practiced. Therefore, introducing person-first language and guidelines into the standards and principles of every media outlet at a provincial and national scale is a step in the right direction to de-stigmatise reporting around substance use and harm reduction.

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### **Engaging people with lived and living experience of substance use in the project:**

Professionals for Ethical Engagement of Peers (PEEP) has representation from across BC and is supported by the BC Centre for Disease Control to provide regular consultation regarding harm reduction and substance use policies, programs and research. PEEP identified participants for a focus group to explore the impact that stigmatizing language and images in the media has on people who use drugs. A semi-structured interview guide was used and the focus group audio-recorded.

The transcript was reviewed and PEEP helped to select relevant quotes to include in the report. PEEP also took photos in their communities and submitted them for inclusion in the report as examples of non-stigmatizing images.

PEEP members were engaged in the online Zoom session with journalism students; they were available in breakout groups to answer students' questions and provided their key messages to the students. PEEP provided feedback about the session which is included in the report. PEEP has also volunteered to provide a session with journalists to enable engagement and discussion with if they wish.

### **Dissemination and engagement session with journalism students**

An online Zoom session was held in November with journalism students from The University of British Columbia. The purpose of the Zoom session was to present the final report and its findings to the students and provide journalism students with the opportunity to engage with PEEP members. Students who attended the Zoom session or reviewed the presentation at a later date and completed the post session feedback survey were eligible to receive a Starbucks e-gift card.

### **Dissemination of report to journalists and media outlets**

In January 2020 a hard copy of the report accompanied by a letter was been mailed to various local and national journalists and media outlets including print, radio and TV. The journalists will also receive an e-mail and link to the report.

### **Image repository**

Karen Ward, a member of the Downtown Eastside community and advocate for people who use drugs has been contracted to take non-stigmatizing images about substance use and harm reduction to enable the creation of a repository of non-stigmatizing stock images. These images will be available for students and researchers to include in presentations and reports, and for the media to access for inclusion in newsprint, online and TV. The website to access these images is currently in development.

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### **Reports and presentations available online:**

**Media and Language report:** Butt M, Loh J, Tsang VWL, Rempel E, Lupick T, Buxton JA. Media & Language: De-stigmatizing Language around Substance Use and Harm Reduction Reporting. Findings from MSFHR Reach project (Sep 2020) Vancouver, BC. BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) available at: <https://towardtheheart.com/resource/bccdc-media-and-language-report/open>

**Language and Media Journalism Student Session Presentation** available at: <https://towardtheheart.com/resource/media-language-presentation/open>

**Language and Media Journalism Student Session Feedback Report:** available at: <https://towardtheheart.com/resource/language-and-media-journalism-student-session/open>

**Professionals for Ethical Engagement of Peers (PEEP)** – for further details please see <https://towardtheheart.com/peep>