

06 April 2018

Dear Michelle Stanistreet

This letter is for your attention and to share with your members within the National Union of Journalists, as appropriate. I am writing this letter on behalf of the organisations listed below in response to the recent articles published in UK national newspapers about obesity. Empirical research indicates that many newspaper articles are stigmatising, discriminatory and potentially inciting hatred.

We note that these articles do not adhere to the National Union of Journalists' (NUJ) Code of Conduct. We highlight three principles from the NUJ Code of Conduct that all professional journalists are expected to abide by, and in doing so, provide evidence to demonstrate a lack of adherence from professional journalists:

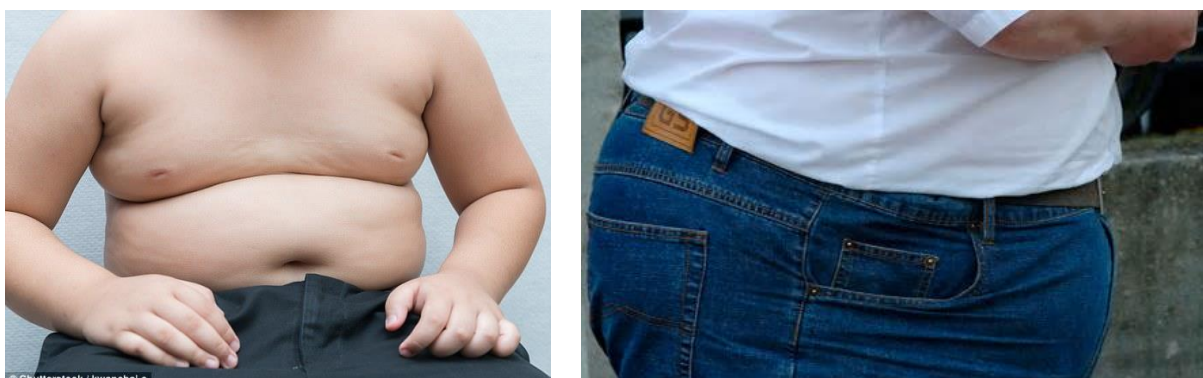
1. “Produces no material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person’s age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status or sexual orientation”

Whilst health status does not explicitly appear amongst the list above, we believe that it should. Much of the content used to describe people with obesity is stigmatising and promotes hatred and discrimination. Examples have been reported previously in a study of UK national newspapers ([Flint et al., 2016](#)), and recent examples have been highlighted in a call to the media to improve the portrayal of obesity ([Flint et al., 2018](#)). Here are just a few of the example articles that have been identified in the last six months:

- a. Coren G. [Heffalump Traps will Clear the NHS of Fatties](#). The Times. 2017.
- b. Freeman H. [Why I refuse to let my daughter be taught by a fat teacher](#): Writer HILARY FREEMAN says it is time for some home truths about obesity. Daily Mail. 2017.
- c. Tanner, C. [Nearly HALF of all primary school children are dangerously overweight in parts of Britain, reveals first map to track their bulging waistlines](#). Daily Mail. 2018.

In addition, we would also like to highlight the misuse of images used to portray people with obesity to the general public in UK national newspapers. Many of the images used are highly stigmatising and put forward an inaccurate representation of people who are overweight or with obesity. For instance, many of the published images are of people who have had their heads cropped from pictures (see Figure 1), are of people without their clothes on (see Figure 2) and are predominantly of people consuming food (see Figure 3). These stigmatising images only serve to promote stigma and discrimination of people who are overweight or with obesity.

Figure 1: Examples of a headless image used in UK national newspapers to portray people with obesity



Source on the left: Tanner, C. [Nearly HALF of all primary school children are dangerously overweight in parts of Britain, reveals first map to track their bulging waistlines](#). Daily Mail. 2018.

Source for image of the right: Walker, P. [Half of UK men could be obese by 2030](#). The Guardian. 2011.

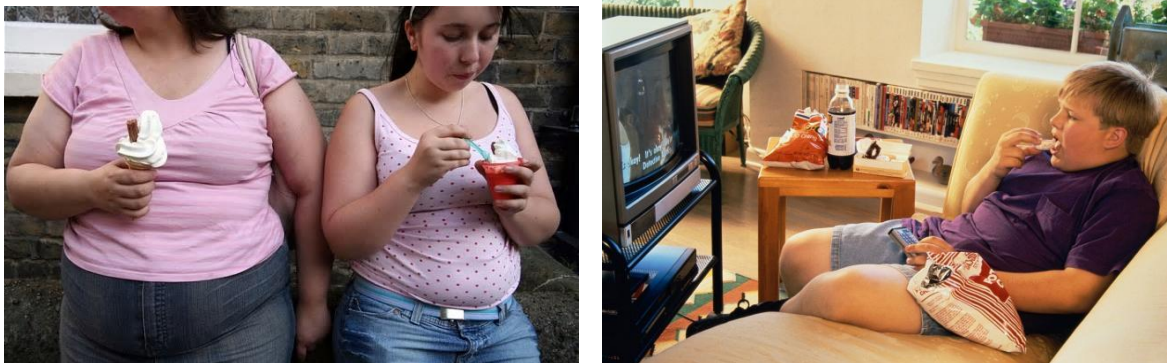
Figure 2: Examples of topless images of people with obesity used in UK national newspapers



Source for image of the left: Wooller, S. [Sleep clue to teen obesity: your kids going to bed late is making them fat](#). The Sun. 2016.

Source for image of the right: Ryan, V. [Britain's obesity crisis is creating an 'unemployable underclass', says former Tory minister](#). The Telegraph. 2018.

Figure 3: Examples of people with obesity consuming food image used in UK national newspapers



Source for image of the left: Knapton, S. [Parents not to blame for teen obesity, say researchers](#). The Telegraph. 2015.

Source for image of the right: McArdle, H. [Teens bombarded with junk food ads 'twice as likely to be obese', finds cancer research study](#). The Herald. 2018.

2. “Strives to ensure that the information disseminated is honestly conveyed, accurate and fair”

The portrayal of people who are overweight or with obesity is often inaccurate and based on unfounded stereotypes. This is likely to lead to public confusion, misunderstanding, formation of stigmatising attitudes and beliefs, and influence internalised weight bias in people across the weight spectrum. By not providing accurate and fair portrayal of overweight and obesity, we feel journalists are doing the public a disservice.

Over a 12-month data collection period, [Flint et al. \(2016\)](#) highlighted that 98% of articles informed readers that weight is controllable. This is despite considerable literature (e.g., [Barsh, Farooqi, & O'Rahilly, 2000](#); [Wardle, Carnell, Haworth, & Plomin, 2008](#)) and the [UK Government's Foresight](#)

[Report \(2007\)](#) highlighting the many uncontrollable causes of obesity including genetics and metabolic disorders. The Foresight Report identified over 100 factors that cause obesity, yet media portrayal focuses on gluttony and laziness as the core drivers of obesity. Thus, despite the complexity of obesity, the public are given a simplistic explanation that by exercising more and eating less, people can lose weight and it is within an individual's control, which is seldom the case. This is concerning given that stronger beliefs that obesity is controllable, are associated with higher weight stigmatising attitudes.

3. “Differentiates between fact and opinion”

Similar to the points above, whilst in some cases journalists have produced opinion pieces, these opinion pieces are highly stereotypical and lacking factual accuracy relating to weight, weight gain, weight loss and obesity. There is also a need to avoid reporting on non-factual information from others or when reporting about events.

Future steps and collaborative action

Going forward, we would like to suggest a working relationship with the NUJ to support journalists to produce non-stigmatising portrayals of obesity and in doing so, adhere to the NUJ Code of Conduct. As contributors of media content that is consumed by millions of people across the UK, journalists have an important role in providing information and as such, they influence public attitudes and beliefs, and subsequent behaviour. In alignment with the NUJ Codes of Conduct, it is imperative that the portrayal of public health is non-stigmatising, accurate and factual.


As a first step, we would suggest the three recommendations outlined below.

1. Including *health status and appearance* amongst the NUJ Code of Conduct list of characteristics that journalists should not produce material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination. In including health status and appearance, this would include portrayal of obesity, but also other health related topics. For instance, we note that mental health is not specifically included. Again, health status would include physical and mental health.
2. To enforce the NUJ Code of Conduct. The Code of Conduct should be adhered to by all members of the NUJ.
3. Collaboratively develop guidelines to support professional journalists to produce material that does not lead to hatred or discrimination based on a person's weight. Whilst some journalists are aware that their reporting is stigmatising, others are not and from previous discussions with journalists, they have suggested that they would appreciate support in improving their portrayal of obesity.

It is imperative that we all recognise our role in improving public health. Reducing stigma and discrimination towards people based on health status can improve the effectiveness of public health initiatives, campaigns, and policy. Media portrayal is a crucial element that can contribute to reduced stigma and discrimination, and thus, we feel that by working collaboratively, we can benefit public health in the UK.

Yours Sincerely,

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This letter has been supported by:

1. Andrew Selous MP

Public health/obesity organisations

2. Association for the Study of Obesity
3. World Obesity Federation
4. MoreLife Limited
5. Helping Overcome Obesity Problems
6. Obesity Empowerment Network
7. SHINE Health Academy Limited
8. British Dietetics Association
9. British Dietetics Association Obesity Group
10. HENRY
11. C3 Collaborating for Health
12. The Caroline Walker Trust
13. Obesity Action Scotland
14. Obesity Action Coalition
15. International Federation for the Surgery of Obesity and Metabolic Disorders
16. British Obesity and Metabolic Surgery Society
17. Beat Eating Disorders
18. NCD Child
19. #obsmuk
20. Keo Films

Universities

21. Applied Obesity Research Centre, Leeds Beckett University
22. Weight Stigma Research Group, Leeds Beckett University
23. Leeds Business School, Leeds Beckett University
24. School of Cultural Studies and Humanities, Leeds Beckett University
25. Physical Activity Special Interest Group, Wolfson Research Institute for Health & Wellbeing, Durham University
26. National Centre of Sport and Exercise Medicine in Sheffield
27. Academy of Sport and Physical Activity, Sheffield Hallam University
28. Centre of Sport and Exercise Science, Sheffield Hallam University
29. Sport Industry Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam University
30. Centre for Identify and Intergroup Relations, Queens University Belfast
31. Institute of Psychology, Health and Society, University of Liverpool
32. Centre for Appearance Research, University of West England
33. Obesity Research Centre, University College London
34. International Inequalities Institute, London School of Economics
35. Physical Activity for Health Research Centre, University of Edinburgh
36. Centre for Food Policy, City University of London
37. Weight and Obesity Research Group, University of Hertfordshire
38. NIHR By-Band-Sleeve Study Team, University of Bristol
39. Department of Psychology, City University of London