

## Reporting styles

### What approach is best?

#### Style of reporting and questionable 'evidence'

#### Are quotes from the parents of dead drug users helpful in preventing other drug deaths?

Quotes from the parents of dead drug users are a standard media response to individual tragedies. Some sections of the media also use them as a tool for generating a human-interest angle in broader drugs issues and reflecting what they perceive to be the views of their readers.

The helpfulness of such interventions varies. In some cases, quotes from people personally affected by drug deaths can be a useful way of bringing important facts about drugs to the attention of a wider audience. There is however a danger in treating such people as instant experts whose views are understandably based on grief and anger rather than sound evidence.

Parents are often interviewed in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy when even the police might not be in possession of all the facts. So for example, parents might genuinely believe that their child died because someone gave them a 'bad' tablet. This is one of the myths of drug use; presenting information in this form might actually increase the dangers for individuals. Most of the people who have died from taking ecstasy did not swallow contaminated tablets, but a relatively pure drug.

There are of course examples where parents affected by drug related deaths do research the issues thoroughly and whose comments can tend to inform rather than prejudice debate.

As a rule, while it is perfectly legitimate to quote such people on how a certain incident has affected them, journalists should think twice before contacting them for broader comments on details of drugs or drugs policy.

#### Anecdotes are not evidence - particularly true in the field of drug issues

In this area almost more than any other, anecdotes of dealing behaviour, of drug effects, of drug risks, of addiction are usually based upon uncritical assumptions of how these work (see all other areas listed).

#### Even users and dealers anecdotes must be treated with extreme care - This is not necessarily evidence

It is as common for drug users to believe many of the myths and misconceptions about drugs as non-users. Typical examples relate to stories of dangerous adulteration, and of the difficulty of withdrawal. Another common example is that, despite increased levels of purity for most drugs in recent years, users nearly always report drug purity dropping. Dealers typically may report that they believe in dangerous adulteration, provide an anecdote but not be able to provide any first-hand evidence for it.

The key point here is that just because these individuals are 'close' to the activities involved they are often no better informed about certain aspects of what goes on. It is better to only ask and report about their direct experience and even then it's best to double check that they are not mixing what they believe to be true with what they 'know' to be true.

For more information please contact [Ruth Goldsmith](#)