

Lazy, stupid, inaccurate - the Mail on Sunday on e-cigarettes

written by Clive Bates | 27 January 2013

Victory! 19 April 2013... [Press Complaints Commission notice issued.](#)

News! 19 March 2013... Marie Claire agrees to publish response from me (to come).

News! 3 March 2013... Correction issued by Mail on Sunday see [here...](#)

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E-cigarettes 'can cause more harm than smoking,' experts say

- Propylene glycol in e-cigarettes can be harmful
- Chemical can cause acute respiratory system irritation

By SUSANNAH BUTTER

PUBLISHED: 22:00, 26 January 2013 | UPDATED: 23:18, 26 January 2013

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They are billed as a healthier alternative to smoking, yet experts now warn that electronic cigarettes may be more damaging than the habit they replace.

The battery-powered tubes, usually styled to look like real cigarettes, contain a heating element that turns nicotine-laced liquid in a cartridge into a vapour mist that is inhaled.

This produces a sensation similar to smoking the real thing but, say manufacturers, without the carcinogenic chemicals found in cigarette tar.

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Before – lazy, stupid, wrong

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After – deleted but not retracted

Initial post: 27 January 2013

A particularly shoddy and irritating story in today's Mail on Sunday. It is so bad that I was moved to complain to the [Press Complaints Commission](#) via the [PCC online complaint facility](#).

The article: [E-cigarette 'can cause more harm than smoking', experts say](#) is just total rubbish and completely irresponsible. There is no kinder way to put it. The PCC's [Editors' Code of Practice](#) requires:

1.Accuracy: i) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information, including pictures.

The story is [online](#) and at p25 in the Mail on Sunday Review 'Health' section. There are many excellent and devastating [comments](#) on the online version. My complaint and comment are below. I'll let you know how the PCC responds.

Complaint regarding Mail on Sunday article 27 January 2013: E-cigarettes 'can cause more harm than smoking', experts say

1. The headline and premise of the story is completely inaccurate - there are no circumstances in which e-cigarettes cause more harm than smoking. In reality they are almost harmless - probably at least 99% less risky than cigarette smoking. No expert would say this and none has.

2. There is no fact or argument in the article to support the headline or its main premise. This is simply asserted by the by the journalist in the first sentence of the article, and in the headline. The fact that e-cigarettes 'can cause acute respiratory system irritation' in some users is barely relevant. An 'irritation' is a minor issue compared to cancer, heart disease and emphysema caused by smoking. It is these chronic conditions that do the most harm. Most e-cigarette users don't experience this irritation and no figures are given on how many people are afflicted by this irritation or how severely. So even the one health impact that is mentioned is asserted without any quantification or sense of its seriousness. It certainly is not described in a way that justifies the headline or premise of the article. Inflammation and irritation of the respiratory tract is common in smokers (smokers' cough) - as well as cancer, heart disease etc.

3. No experts are quoted in the article saying e-cigarettes 'can cause more harm than smoking' - yet this quote is used in the headline and is unattributed. No experts have said this because it is not true. The article doesn't even support its own (false) premise.

4. There is implicit misleading scaremongering about 'the chemical propylene glycol' (why mention it otherwise?). In reality this is a largely benign substance used as a food additive and in medicines.

A grossly inaccurate story like this could have real impacts on human welfare if it discourages people from switching from smoking cigarettes to e-cigarettes. It is also unfairly damaging to numerous small businesses trying to grow the market for a much safer alternative to smoking. This is particularly irresponsible, ill-informed, and lazy journalism.

I also left a comment on the Mail web site below the article:

Unbelievably ridiculous and irresponsible article. E-cigarettes are at least 99% safer than cigarettes. People smoke mostly for the nicotine, which is a widely used recreational drug usually taken by smoking tobacco. But it is not nicotine that does the damage in smoking, it is particles of burnt tobacco (tar) and hot gases that cause the cancer, emphysema and heart disease. E-cigarettes have none of these hazardous emissions . Articles like this are real-world dangerous, because they may discourage people from making a potentially life-saving switch from cigs to e-cigs. Clive Bates, former Director Action on Smoking & Health (1997-2003)

[Clive Bates](#) , London, 27/1/2013 07:45

Update 1st February: The Mail has taken down the online version of the offending article. However a deletion is not the same as a retraction or correction. Also, the excellent comments that were posted with the article are now lost. I have written back to the PPC, as follows:

Dear _____

I notice that the Mail online has now taken down the article in question and replaced it with a 'page not found' message. I don't know what forms of correction the PCC advise when the accuracy provisions of the Editors' Code are broken. In my opinion the breach was particularly egregious in this instance, and it is not sufficient simply to delete the page. I hope you will ask the Mail to publish a retraction and correction at the same web address. Something like:

"The article you are trying to access "E-cigarettes 'can cause more harm than smoking', experts say" was found to be inaccurate and misleading and has been withdrawn. We accept that experts do not say that e-cigarettes "can cause more harm than smoking" and that the expert consensus is that they are likely to be very much less harmful".

This would set the record straight. I also think those reading this should be able to read the original and the comments that followed.

I realise that you have a process and that has probably not yet run its course, but I thought I should signal now that I think a deletion does not amount to a proper retraction and correction. Similar arguments apply to the printed paper, though of course deletion is not possible.

Regards

Clive Bates

Also, it is worth remembering the context: in the light of [Leveson](#), newspapers are trying to show some discipline and that self-regulation works.

“I remind people that accuracy is the cornerstone of the existing PCC“

So says Paul Dacre, Editor-in-Chief of Associated Newspapers (Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday etc) in evidence to Parliament Joint Committee on the Defamation Bill 18 July 2011 (See [Q789](#))

Update 3rd February: Marie Claire has rehashed this story (strangely without attribution): [Fears e-cigarettes could be more harmful than smoking](#). It is slightly different, but it is no less lazy, stupid and wrong than the original. I've asked the PCC to consider this article too.

Dear _____

The Mail on Sunday article that is the subject of my complaint (130587) has been rehashed and published on-line by Marie Claire. It is not quite the same and there is no attribution of the original, but the same substantive criticisms apply. There is no basis for the headline and top line of the story, no experts have said anything to this effect, the expert and common sense consensus is that these products are very much less hazardous than smoking, and the article's description of risk is prone to exaggeration and scaremongering. I would be grateful if you could add this article to the original complaint, assuming Marie Claire falls within the remit of the PCC.

...

Regards

Clive Bates

Update 4th February: Marie Claire has now taken down the offending article. This is what it previously [said](#).

Update 3rd March - Mail on Sunday issues a correction - though not on line

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

If you wish to point out any inaccuracy, please write to Readers' Editor, Northcliffe House, 2 Derry Street, London W8 5TS or email corrections@pcc.org.uk

■ A Health article on January 27 said some experts believe electronic cigarettes can be more harmful than real ones. In fact we are not aware of any experts who hold this view compared to the risks of cancer, heart disease and lung damage from real cigarettes.

We apologise for any contrary suggestion.

■ A News report last week said Charlotte Porter, 17, who died of deep-vein thrombosis after taking Dianette for acne, may have had an undiagnosed blood clot before being prescribed the

Update 6th March 2013: PCC asks for correspondence from the Mail on Sunday to be withdrawn from publication on this web site. The PCC reminds me that its process is confidential, and that it had pointed this out from the outset.

Confidentiality: The system of self-regulation overseen by the PCC requires good faith on both sides. In order for the PCC to be able to investigate complaints effectively, it is essential that neither party to a complaint, complainant or publication, publishes information which has been provided as part of the investigation - most notably correspondence - without the consent of the other party. Publication without consent may affect the PCC's ability to continue to deal with a complaint or may be considered by the PCC when it reaches a decision as to whether the Code has been breached. Material provided by both complainants and publications during a PCC investigation must only be used for the purpose of the investigation. This will not generally prohibit a publication from publishing details of any ruling made by the Commission.

I apologise and admit I had missed this and had assumed the process would be transparent. Note amendments above.