

Full Length Research Paper

Reporting of the ACT heroin trials

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The aim of this research is to analyse the reports of the proposed heroin maintenance trials in the Australian Capital Territory (A.C.T.), in Melbourne print media during 1997. The proposal for trials of heroin-prescription to long-term users in the A.C.T. was based on extensive scientific research. The rejection of this proposal by Prime Minister Howard raised many questions. This study was designed to help understand what discourses and rhetorical devices were used in the reporting of heroin issues in the media and what part some sections of the media played in the government's decision. Discourse analysis was conducted of newspaper articles from two major Melbourne newspapers, The Age and the Herald-Sun for the year 1997. All articles relating to heroin and drug-policy from the newspapers were included for analysis. Those in favour of the trials used predominantly health and social discourses. Those opposed used moral discourses supported with stereotypes, metaphors, emotive practices and 'inaccuracies'. There were considerable differences in discourses presented by The Age and the Herald-Sun. This study demonstrates that opposition to the heroin trials relied on rhetorical strategies and sensationalistic arguments, rather than meaningful debate of scientific and social issues. Researchers should act to identify the stereotypes and metaphors used in the discourses surrounding an issue and act to disarm them.

Key words: Drugs, discourse, heroin maintenance, prescription, media ownership, metaphor, stereotypes, rhetoric.

INTRODUCTION

As early as 1988, the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) called for the clinical trialing of prescription heroin. This call was repeated by over 20 separate Royal Commissions and major inquires (Hiscock and Hollock, 1997). A comprehensive research program, conducted primarily by the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health (NCEPH) at the Australian National University, recommended that two pilot studies be carried out in the Australian Capital Territory (A.C.T.) to evaluate the feasibility of the controlled availability of opioids (Bammer, 1995). In June 1997, the results of similar trials being conducted in Switzerland were released, reporting what appeared to be conclusive evidence in favour of the practice of prescribing heroin to long-term, problematic heroin users (Uchtenhagen, 1997). A meeting between State Health and Police Ministers held on 31 July, 1997 approved the first stage of such trials. Prior to this meeting, the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, stated that if the proposal was approved by this forum,

then he would support it. This meeting was followed by three weeks of intense lobbying by religious groups, political speculation and a sensational and intense media campaign. On 19 August, Prime Minister Howard reversed his publicly stated position, withdrawing Federal support for the trials because he said that such trials would 'send the wrong message' (The Age, 20 August, 1997:1). While these events occurred a decade ago, the effects of the debate remain relevant and lessons learned from such a clear example of where scientific evidence was ignored in the name of ideology remains a valuable example from which to draw insights into the discursive tactics of parties with political agendas. This paper explores the trends in media reporting of the issue, investigating the frequency and nature of articles from a number of sources, as well as the discursive practices used by the journalists and editors involved.

It is apparent that two of the major contributing factors in the rejection of the heroin trials were the articulation of lay perceptions of the issues surrounding heroin in the

mass media and the role which politicians have had in generating and perpetuating these perceptions. There is an increasing body of research illustrating the importance of the media portrayal on how issues are perceived by the public and politicians and how media portrayal can lead to interventions being appropriate or inappropriate, depending on many factors acting behind the mechanism producing the final media product (that is editorial freedom, ideological interests or even local vs. international focus). Studies such as Lupton (1995) and Shoebridge and Steed (1999) have illustrated that the media have a poor record relating to their portrayal of health matters. Similarly, media portrayal of the drug topic has typically shown a poor understanding of the issues involved (Jernigan and Dorfman, 1996; Orcutt and Turner, 1993).

Orcutt and Turner (1993) demonstrate how the media can act in concert with government agencies to set an agenda for public thought which is based on statistics that misrepresent scientific data. Their review looks at the construction and manipulation of statistics during the 'media epidemic of 1986' that surrounded President Ronald Reagan's 'war on drugs' in the United States. This paper demonstrated how the news media distorted statistics to support the view that the problem was growing and provides an example of how the media, in conjunction with political considerations, distorted arguments to create what amounted to a propaganda campaign on drug usage. Jernigan and Dorfman (1996) conducted a content analysis of television news programs during the peak 'war on drugs' period. They illustrated how the media framed stories by providing only a selection of issues on the topic with some cursory analysis. Jernigan and Dorfman (1996:178) describe this as 'the news may not tell people what to think, but it definitely tells them what to think about...'. They also posited that the portrayal of drug problems tends to focus blame on the individual, rather than on social structures, thereby supporting prevailing norms which deny the role structural factors, such as poverty, in the aetiology of drug-related problems (Jernigan and Dorfman, 1996).

Metaphors in drugs

An important part of developing an understanding of how drug discourses operate is to examine the linguistic devices (such as metaphors and stereotypes) that contribute to these discourses (Manderson, 1997). McGaw (1991) illustrated how the 'war on drugs' metaphor, as used in political contexts, is accepted by the general public in the US as the natural way of thinking about problems associated with drugs in that country. These metaphors determine actors in the conflict, positioning them in various social locations. Stein (1990) suggests that this militaristic metaphor arose to replace the spectre

of nuclear war with war against drugs, alcohol, crime and disease. Most research into the metaphors which dominate drug discourses have focused on the 'war on drugs' and have not addressed the effects of other metaphors or linguistic devices.

Stereotypes in drugs

Similar to the research into metaphors, there is a shortage of published literature examining the effects of stereotypes in drug discourse. These stereotypes can refer to a wide variety of drug-related topics, such as drug users ('junkies'), drug policies ('war on drugs') and treatment settings ('the coal face'). Peele (1996) illustrated that the effects of stereotypes on the U.S. policies for dealing with drugs are largely determined by 'wrong-headed' assumptions. Similarly, Lewis (1992) found that the 'war on drugs' has become a war on drug users, reinforcing the stereotypes that dominate drug discourses. Gadourek and Jessen (1972) also found that such stereotypes are damaging to community perceptions in the drug arena and cordon off a rigid public policy from much needed professional insights.

METHODS

This study is a mixed-method design combining qualitative and quantitative elements. The methodology used in this study is a combination of qualitative discourse analysis of newspaper articles which identified themes and categories and quantitative content analysis. Lupton (1992) broadly defines discourse analysis as 'a critical analysis of the use of language' and outlines its usefulness as a tool for understanding how individuals and institutions communicate through written texts and dialogue. The discourse analysis used in this paper uses the study of rhetorical devices (such as metaphors, polarities and stereotypes) to critically evaluate drug discourses. In addition to the discourse analysis methodology, thematic categories were utilised to enhance the flexibility of this design (Denzin, 1989; Kellehear, 1993). This allows for the creation of categories during the research process to include issues arising from the process of data entry, enhancing the quality of the analysis being undertaken (Kellehear, 1993; Krippendorff, 1980).

Sample

The choice of newsprint as the primary data source was made because newspapers supply the most comprehensive coverage of issues (Lupton, 1992) and provide a 'more permanent and reliable' form of communication (Krippendorff, 1980). The material used in this study consists of articles appearing in the two highest selling newspapers in Melbourne (The Age and The Herald-Sun) and has been chosen with the aim of gaining a representative sample of the discourses surrounding the A.C.T. heroin trials (Australian Press Council, 1996). The Herald-Sun is a Murdoch-owned tabloid newspaper and has Melbourne's largest readership of around 60% of all print media consumers. In contrast, The Age is a broadsheet newspaper which is read by approximately 35% of newspaper consumers in Melbourne (Australian Press Council, 1996). Where

Table 1. Disposition for each newspaper.

Newspaper	For	Against	Neutral	Total
The Age	20 (62.5%)	8 (17%)	52 (67.5%)	80
The Herald Sun	12 (37.5%)	38 (83%)	25(32.5%)	75
Total Items	32 (100%)	46 (100%)	77 (100%)	155

Table 2. Arguments expressed in different sources.

Newspaper	Health		Social		Economic		Moral		Legal/Political		Total
	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N
The Age	52	33.8	58	37.7	34	22.7	9	5.8	0	0	154
Herald Sun	19	20.2	17	18.1	18	19.2	31	32.9	9	9.6	94

The Age is predominantly a liberal publication, The Herald-Sun is a more conservative commentary.

The entire year of 1997 was chosen as the time frame as this length of time allows a full review of topics that preceded and followed the trial proposal being rejected. Newspaper articles were drawn directly from the publishers' respective databases, using the keyword searches: heroin, heroin trials, drug trials, drug policy and drugs. The choice of Melbourne newspapers over Sydney newspapers was ultimately viewed as arbitrary due to the editorial styles of the newspapers selected being observed as widely representative of most newspapers (Lupton, 1995).

Thematic categories

The categories of 'for' the trials and 'against' the trials were determined on the overall content of the item. Items were coded as ambivalent/neutral when viewpoints that were both 'for' and 'against' were discussed, or when the item simply reported an occurrence in the drug field without comment (such as the release of research results). The variable: 'Arguments used?' was coded into five major categories: health, social, moral, economic and political/legal. Health arguments were defined as those that focus on the medical problems associated with an individual's drug use. Social arguments were identified as those that referred to issues such as legal status, 'drug related crime' and the spread of infectious disease such as HIV and Hepatitis. Economic arguments were categorised as those drug discourses which identified issues such as costs of ambulance attendance, police involvement, lost productivity and the expenditure of health care resources. For the purposes of this study moral arguments were identified as those arguments which were based on the idea that drug use per se is 'wrong', or a sin. Finally, arguments which used issues of the law or political acceptance as a basis for their viewpoint were categorised as political/legal.

Categorisation of newspaper articles and specific instances of metaphors, stereotypes and other attributions were checked and confirmed by a senior colleague.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In total, 155 newspaper items were coded. There were 80 Age articles and 75 Herald-Sun articles. A total of 24 individuals or institutions that were interested parties

(such as politicians, religious bodies or media personalities) were identified (players). Twenty seven individuals or institutions were referred to in the articles as 'experts'.

Table 1 highlights that the Herald-Sun published the majority of the items that were opposed to the heroin trials and The Age published the majority of the articles that were in favour of the proposed heroin trials. However, The Age published twice as many articles that were neutral than the Herald-Sun. Therefore, the Herald-Sun constituted the major source of discourses opposed to the heroin trials.

The discourses used in different news items are shown in Table 2. Notable in this table was the higher usage of moralistic discourses (32.9%) by articles in the Herald-Sun. In contrast, articles in The Age used mostly social, health and economic arguments. The results in Table 2 illustrate that the Herald-Sun constituted the major source of moralistic discourses in the debate over the heroin trials. This may point to a more purposeful approach opposing the heroin trials in editorial policy of the Herald-Sun.

Metaphors

An analysis of the articles to determine the source of most of the metaphors was undertaken and results (Table 3) show that 54.7% of articles in the Herald-Sun used metaphors in comparison to 18.7% of Age articles. Eleven players and one 'expert' referee used metaphors. War metaphors were the most common type used, constituting 40.8% of all the metaphors used followed by the 'shooting gallery' metaphor (13.3%). Other metaphors included: animal metaphors (the likening of users' behaviour to animal characteristics), food metaphors (heroin as 'ice cream'), and dirty work for health professionals ('working at the coal-face' or 'getting your hands dirty'). Prime Minister Howard used metaphors more than any other individual or institution, constituting over half

Table 3. Metaphors used by different sources.

Newspaper	Items	Number of metaphors used	(%)
The Age	80	15	18.7
The Herald Sun	75	41	54.7

Table 4. Metaphors in articles For/Against in different sources.

Newspaper	For		Against		Neutral		Total
	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N
The Age	8	57.10	3	9.70	4	36.40	15
The Herald Sun	6	42.90	28	90.30	7	63.60	41
Totals	14	100	31	100	11	100	56
% (metaphors)	25.00		55.40		19.60		100.00

Table 5. Stereotypes used in media sources.

Newspaper	Number of stereotypes used	Items	(%)
The Age	25	80	31.2
The Herald Sun	40	75	53.3

(54.7%) of all the metaphors utilised. Both the Prime Minister and Herald-Sun articles used a wide variety of metaphors in comparison other players, suggesting that both sources used metaphors as a discursive strategy.

Table 4 illustrates that more than half of all metaphors used occurred in articles that were opposed to the heroin trials. Of all the articles opposed to the trials that used metaphors, 90.3% appeared in the Herald-Sun. Tables 3 and 4 illustrate a clear pattern of metaphor use. Metaphors were used more than twice as much in articles that were opposed to the heroin trials and the Herald-Sun was more likely to run these stories. Thus, discourses opposed to the heroin trials were more likely to use metaphors.

The findings regarding metaphors hold important implications for understanding how the different parties perceive drug use. Glucksberg and Keysar (1993) propose that the type of metaphor used by a party illustrates, at least partially, how they perceive the topic under discussion. As previously discussed, war metaphors reflect and encourage an oppositional mindset towards drug users, and the most common result of these discourses is an alienation of drug users from mainstream society. The metaphor of the 'shooting gallery' conjures up images of a circus or fair ground and side shows. In effect, this metaphor implies that the intravenous use of drugs is fun, or at least recreational. Similarly, food metaphors such as heroin as 'ice cream' also imply that the drug user is indulging a whim, or flippancy craving. Finally, the dirty work metaphors

('working at the coal-face' or 'getting your hands dirty') implies that heroin addicts are somehow tainted, dirty or 'unclean'. These metaphors firmly place the drug user as an 'other', outside what the community perceives as acceptable.

Stereotypes

Table 5 reports that the Herald-Sun used more stereotypes than The Age. Table 6 shows that 75% of the articles that were opposed to the heroin trials and used stereotypes appeared in the Herald-Sun.

When Tables 5 and 6 are analysed together, they demonstrate clear trends in the use of stereotypes. Stereotypes were used more than twice as much by articles that were opposed to the heroin trials. The Herald-Sun was more likely to run articles that opposed the trials and used stereotypes in their drug discourses.

'Accuracy'

The thematic category of 'accuracy' was developed during data entry in response to the observation of a number of misrepresentations and inaccuracies in the discourses surrounding the heroin trials in relation to published research. It was seen as particularly important to include these events, as the use of such misrepresentations was often related to important discourses opposing the heroin trials. There are three elements of the 'accuracy' category. These are: the use of 'unsubstantiated claims', the misrepresentation of research findings or other peoples' arguments and discrepancies between what was previously stated and what is currently being said. The term 'unsubstantiated claims' refers to the instance of an author making statements that have been shown to be definitively erroneous (according to

Table 6. Stereotypes in articles For/Against in different newspapers.

Newspaper	For		Against		Neutral		Total
	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N
The Age	6	66.70	9	25.00	10	50.00	25
The Herald Sun	3	33.30	27	75.00	10	50.00	40
Totals	9	100	36	100	20	100	65
% (Stereotypes)	13.80		55.40		30.80		100.00

Table 7. Number of times player made 'inaccurate' claim or misrepresented an argument.

Player	Unsubstantiated	Discrepancy	Misrepresentation	Total
PM John Howard	3		2	12
The Salvation Army	1		-	3
Premier Jeff Kennett	2		-	1
Alan Jones (DJ)	-		1	1
Robert Knowles (Vic. Health Minister)	2		-	-
Drug Arm Victoria	1		-	1
John Laws (DJ)	-		-	1
Totals	9		3	19

scientific evidence reported in refereed journals) or have not been substantiated by research. An example of 'misrepresentation' is the claim by some that approving the heroin trials was the first step to total legalisation, a claim which was deliberately misleading. Finally, 'discrepancies' indicates the change in argument or position by an individual or institution. An example of the label 'discrepancy' was when Prime Minister Howard stated publicly that he would support the heroin trials if approved by the health ministers, when at the same time, in a private discussion reported later, he stated that the trials would never be approved while he was Prime Minister (The Age, 1997:8).

Table 7 reports which players made 'inaccurate' assertions. Of those players listed above, all were opposed to the heroin trials, apart from Victorian Premier Kennett, who remained non-committal. Drug Arm, the Salvation Army, and the two DJs listed are considered right-wing and reactionary within Australian politics. The results showed that only those players opposed to the heroin trials used discursive practices that were 'inaccurate' to support their arguments. Table 8 reports which type of 'inaccurate' claim was made in which newspaper. Noteworthy results include the Herald-Sun making 74.2% of all 'unsubstantiated claims' made and 73.8% of all 'inaccurate' claims made in all of the items analysed.

Table 9 illustrates that articles opposed to the heroin trials used significantly more 'inaccurate' claims (59.5%) than articles for the heroin trials (11.9%). Similarly,

'inaccuracies' were mostly reported against the heroin trials in the Herald-Sun newspaper (76%).

Tables 7 to 9 illustrate how the making of 'inaccurate' claims follows a similar pattern to the other discursive practices investigated. 'Inaccurate' claims were used more than twice as much by articles that were opposed to the heroin trials and these articles were more likely to appear in the Herald-Sun.

Time distribution of articles

Figure 1 illustrates the temporal distribution of articles during 1997. This graph illuminates one event in articles in the Herald-Sun newspaper where there was no newsworthy event (denoted by ** on Figure 1) and the paper appeared to be generating a substantial number of articles. This peak occurs in the week before the rejection of the trials. During this week the Murdoch newspapers (The Daily Telegraph (Sydney) and The Herald-Sun (Melbourne)) ran a campaign opposing the trials, depicting Dr Wooldridge in front of an ice cream van doling out heroin with the title 'Mr Trippy' (The Age, 1997:23). Notably, Mr Murdoch was in Australia during this week and held a meeting with Prime Minister Howard. These results cast doubt on claims of editorial independence of Murdoch newspapers, supporting previous studies of editorial styles within the Murdoch media (Paty, 1988).

These findings reveal how the issue of media cross-

Table 8. 'Inaccurate' claims in newspaper articles.

Newspaper	Unsubstantiated		Discrepancy		Misrepresentation		Total
	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N
The Age	8	25.80	1	33.30	0	25.00	11
The Herald Sun	23	74.20	2	66.70	0	75.00	31
Totals	31	100	3	100	8	100	42
(%)		73.80		7.10		19.00	100.00

Table 9. 'Inaccuracies' in articles for/against for different sources.

Newspaper	For		Against		Neutral		Total
	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N
The Age	2	40.00	6	24.00	3	25.00	11
The Herald Sun	3	60.00	19	76.00	8	75.00	31
Totals	5	100	25	100	12	100	42
(%)		11.90		59.50		28.60	100.00

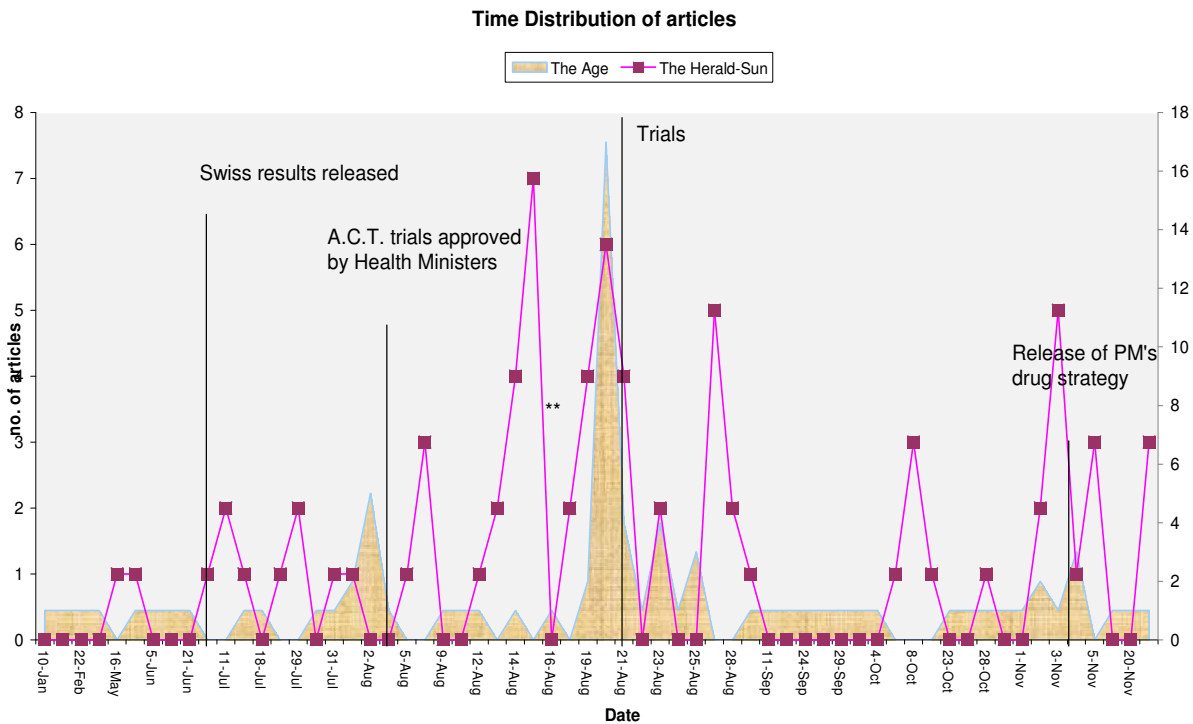


Figure 1. Time distribution of articles.

ownership may be central in both determining and serving the dominant interests of our society. This study acts as an example of what can happen when a media baron (Murdoch) and a politician (Howard) act in concert on a particular issue. Both of Australia's media barons at that time (Murdoch and Mr Kerry Packer) have vast stakes involved in the issue of cross-owned media. As illustrated by the results for The Age in this study,

newspapers such as The Age tend to act as a balance for the sensationalisation, typical of the Murdoch newspapers (Paty, 1988). Because the information available to the general public comes in increasingly smaller information bytes and standardised formats (Jernigan and Dorfman, 1996) and considering the trend towards an ever shrinking level of media ownership, this study illustrates how the issue of media cross-ownership remains

important in relation to drug discourses.

LIMITATIONS

The most important issue surrounding this methodology is that the research is being undertaken by a single researcher, leaving it open to subjective interpretation. While categorisations and attributions were confirmed by a colleague, such confirmation still reflects the thinking of like-minded individuals. This issue is particularly pertinent in the qualitative classification of categories such as the 'arguments used' and 'accuracy' fields which require the researcher's judgement (Krippendorff, 1980). As with any qualitative form of analysis, this design is open to the 'positivist' criticism that it is too subjective and may differ significantly if the coding was undertaken by a researcher of differing gender, class, ethnicity or age. In response to these criticisms it has been recognised by Lupton (1992) that interpretation of this nature is common within the 'humanistic' disciplines and that analysis of this type is necessary to understand the socio-political context in which research is undertaken. Furthermore, these 'positivistic' assertions are based on the assumption that scientific objectivity and 'truth' are apolitical and without historical context, which is rejected by numerous authors (e.g. Douglas, 1967; Foucault, 1977; Lupton, 1992:148; Turner, 1987) as failing to consider the effects of context, emotions, power dynamics and socio-economic values of the researchers involved. Such effects will most likely affect interpretation of findings, the study design chosen and even the topic under consideration. This position, that research is a highly subjective enterprise, is also strongly supported by Berger (1991:7) who uses the example of cancer research to assert that no researcher can ever be totally objective, particularly 'where values are deeply consensual or taken for granted'. Thus, it is acknowledged that the research design used in the present study may be subject to some bias due to variables associated with the researcher's characteristics, however these possible sources of bias have been identified and considered in the final reporting of any results (Denzin, 1978:248).

Conclusion

The items analysed above represent all of the articles generated in 1997 from the two major Melbourne newspapers surrounding the proposed heroin trials. In each of the different categories of this discourse analysis there is a clear distinction between those who were 'for' and 'against' the heroin trials. Those parties opposed to the heroin trials used notably more moral arguments, metaphors, stereotypes and 'inaccurate' claims than those arguing for the trials. Thus, it may be concluded

that the parties opposed to the heroin trials relied on the use of rhetorical devices and moralistic statements to support their position. These findings have illustrated that The Age newspaper showed a higher level of journalistic impartiality in their reporting of the issues surrounding the heroin trials. In contrast, The Herald-Sun ran a concerted campaign opposed to the trials, with images of syringe-toting teddy bears and headlines such as 'Free drugs for criminals' (The Herald-Sun, 1997:1), designed to foster fear surrounding the heroin trials and the drug users they were aimed at and the need for war-like responses.

This study has demonstrated that health professionals and researchers must take account of the fact that policy does not occur in a vacuum and that context is crucial in determining outcomes. When a new social program is being introduced, issues such as timing and political agendas should be anticipated in the research phase. This research has demonstrated the discursive strategies used by conservative stakeholders to polarise and sensationalise a discussion which revolved around a trial based on the best scientific evidence available. While the topic is undoubtedly controversial, support was strong in political and professional circles and this example provides valuable lessons for those wishing to implement controversial, though evidence-based public policy. Preliminary research should identify players in the issue and how they are likely to react. Furthermore, researchers must act to identify the stereotypes and metaphors used in the discourses surrounding an issue and act to disarm and discredit them.

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