

May 1, 2015

Mr. Dave Patterson
siamdave@yahoo.ca

Dear Mr. Patterson:

Here is my review of your complaint about an interview on The Current. It took a little longer than the usual response time because I have been away from the office.

COMPLAINT

You were one of six people who wrote to complain about an interview done by The Current's host Anna Maria Tremonti. Ms. Tremonti interviewed Darlene Tindall, a woman who had chosen not to vaccinate her children. The conversation focused largely on the measles mumps and rubella vaccine (MMR) as the coverage took place at the time of measles outbreaks in Canada and the United States. There had been quite a lot of media attention on the motivation and thinking of parents who refused to provide their offspring with childhood vaccinations in the face of strong medical and public policy views that this is a dangerous practice.

The segment was entitled "[Vaccinations: pro and anti-vaxxer parents make their cases.](#)" It included clips from people who had experienced the effects of measles – either personally or through a family member. It also included interviews with two mothers: Mallory Olsheski, who has a three year old who takes immuno-suppressant drugs and is vulnerable to measles and other infectious diseases, and Darlene Tindall. It was the interview with Ms. Tindall that raised serious concerns for you. You complained that this "outrageous segment" was one-sided and unduly attacked Ms. Tindall. You outlined your concerns in detail, so I will reproduce significant segments of your correspondence. When you initially wrote, you stated that "the merits of either argument are not directly at issue in this complaint" but rather the tone and attitude of Ms. Tremonti in interviewing "this ordinary nice Canadian citizen." You devoted quite a lot of attention to the assertion that Ms. Tremonti was taking a "pro-vax position and was dishonest in its portrayal of the facts about the measles, and the measles vaccine.

Others who wrote also objected to the tone of the interview with Ms. Tindall. You referred to it as a “brutal attack on a more-or-less innocent young Canadian woman.” You said it was bullying and “way over the line of civility.” You said it was obvious she had been set up and was “invited on the show under false pretenses for the bully to beat up in public, evidently for daring to disagree with the CBC’s opinion on a media-led witch hunt. You characterized the interview as a “pre-planned assault.” You said the programmers were taking advantage of a “weak defense.” You said if they were really interested in hearing the anti-vaccination position they should have interviewed other, more experienced spokespeople.

You gave an example of the bullying and one-sided nature of the episode, citing an exchange between the host and the two guests:

“Towards the end, as Ms Tindall was, in ‘fighting’ parlance, dazed and ready to go down after a few minutes of nonstop bullying and irrational (we can use anecdotes but not you, papers supporting our position are ‘scientific’ but yours are not, etc) attack from Ms Tremonti and her puppet/co-conspirator pro-vax witness on Ms Tindall’s beliefs and ignorance, she brought out the big hammer to apply the coup de grace to her emotionally weakened victim, saying, in essence, Alright, you nice lady - but everyone in your community needs you to put aside your personal beliefs, because Science has proven you wrong, and you need to get these vaccinations for your children to protect the children of all the other mothers who do not want their babies to die from this horrible disease which they are really in increased danger of getting because of your anti-scientific beliefs - how do you respond to the concerns of our other guest, who does not want her baby to die because you don't understand science and refuse to get your children vaccinated?’ - just outrageous and unfair bullying, really, to this young lady who obviously was very concerned about other people, in a show advertised as a ‘conversation’ between two Canadians on the vaccine controversy, and a statement far more reflective of hyperbole than fact. If this was a ‘fair’ debate moderated by Ms Tremonti, why didn't she then ask a similar question of her other guest - for instance - Well, Ms Olsheski, how would you feel if you forced Ms Tindall to have her children vaccinated, and one of them suffered a terrible brain disease from the vaccination? Would you feel good about that?”

In subsequent correspondence, you enumerated the ways in which you thought The Current segment had violated CBC policy. You thought it was dishonest in the way it presented the severity of the disease and unfair on several counts, among them:

“- constantly challenging one guest to 'prove' everything, no challenges at all of the other guest, even when she made grossly exaggerated claims

- giving an exaggerated view of the severity of the disease, and refusing to allow the other guest to talk about how it is actually mild in most cases”

You think that the term “anti-vaxxer” is “derogatory and dishonest.” You think the controversy around the measles vaccine is more nuanced and subtle. You explained why you think the whole episode was improperly set up and that the position of those who question the measles vaccine was misrepresented, and that the impact of not vaccinating was greatly exaggerated:

“... this entire debate is dishonestly framed, after the highly dishonest and misleading ‘anti vaxxer’ slur. The basic position of the ‘pro vaxxers’ (at least as far as I can make it out, I don’t think they ever lay out any clear position) seems to be that the measles is very dangerous, the measles vaccine is very safe, so you really need to get this vaccination, there is no good reason not to get vaccinated, to help prevent some large number of deaths and worse in our country! But. But that is false framing, very false in some important ways, with some scientific ‘truth’ at the core, and then some very unscientific opinion and fear-mongering layered around it, trying, I suppose, to include the opinion and fear-mongering in the ‘scientific’ envelope of ‘the vaccine is safe (therefore everything else we say is scientific too!, which certainly seemed to be Ms Tremonti’s general approach)’, and fooling the simple minded into believing the fear mongering and opinion without examining it closely ... Yes, the vaccine is pretty much accepted as safe and effective - but that is where the real, verified ‘science’ and ‘fact’ end, and a big area very legitimately opens up for discussion about things around this fact.

Because, most importantly, there is no serious and ‘hard’ scientific evidence that the disease is actually significantly dangerous ***to the generally healthy Canadian population****, dangerous enough to warrant a population-wide vaccination program or incite mass anger at those with questions about the vaccination, and that is where Ms Tremonti and so many others are being very dishonest, and Ms Tindall, and many others out here, want more information, an open and honest discussion of the various things other than ‘but the vaccine is safe!!’ surrounding the demand that everyone get vaccinated, to get some better clarity on this before getting a vaccination that might have a low rate of potential complications, but still does have scientifically well documented, not argued cases of serious consequences, and added to the fact that there is no evidence at all that not getting the measles vaccine is going to have any significant danger for the average healthy Canadian. There is simply no serious ‘scientific’ evidence that a few cases of measles in Canada means that a large number of people could die, or suffer one of the other serious sequelae such as brain damage that are talked about, if we don’t all run down to the nearest clinic and get vaccinated - and attempting to create the impression this is a disease that could kill or seriously injure a very large number of people if we don’t all get vaccinated is simply dishonest, and definitely very **not** scientific. And it is very much NOT part of the mandate of the CBC to encourage this kind of mindless fear, a

mandate and standards which, as I must note again, is to ‘..to inform, to reveal, to contribute to the understanding of issues of public interest and to encourage citizens to participate in our free and democratic society.’ Fear-mongering and attacking people with questions about some proposed policies are not part of that definition.”

You strongly objected to the fact that Ms. Tremonti only considered information to be valid science if it supported the position that vaccination is critical. You asked “Just how honest is it to have an attitude of, essentially any studies that support our position we will call science, and any studies you refer to that disagree with our position we will simply dismiss unread categorically as unscientific ...there are many legitimate studies out there there by many legitimate people questioning many aspects of the ‘pro-vax’ position, including much insightful and intelligent and very relevant commentary- it is completely invalid and simply dishonest to simply say you don’t have to consider anything that disagrees with your personal position....”

You challenged the fact that the show began with anecdotes from people who had experienced serious side effects of measles. You asked why the program had not asked Ms. Tindall for contacts of people who had family members who had died or who had suffered greatly after receiving the vaccine. You thought that would have provided balance.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

The executive producer of The Current, Jennifer Moroz, replied to your concerns. She explained that the programmers decided to create the segment because there had recently been a series of measles outbreaks in Canada and the United States. She explained that “last spring British Columbia was dealing with hundreds of cases of the highly contagious viral disease, which represents one of the leading causes of child deaths worldwide.” At the time of broadcast, there were other clusters of infection. She noted there was a great deal of public discussion about the issue of vaccination. She said there seemed to be growing tension between those who choose not to vaccinate their children and those who have vulnerable children who cannot be vaccinated as well as those who do keep their children’s shots up to date. “We wanted to have a conversation with parents from each camp to hear, first-hand, and better understand their stances and feelings on what has become a very emotional, fear-infused issue for many.”

She stressed that the programmer’s intention was not to be a debate about the science behind the safety of the MMR vaccine. She added:

“There is near unanimous consensus within the scientific/medical community, based on a wide body of research, that the vaccine is safe and effective, and protects not only the individual from contracting measles, but prevents its spread through so-called ‘herd immunity.’ You suggest that by relying on the established science, we were ‘assuming the role of propagandist.’ I disagree -

and again, do so with respect. As journalists, we rely on facts. And the facts show that while there are some very remote serious adverse effects to the MMR vaccine, the chances of dying from measles are far greater. To suggest otherwise would be journalistically irresponsible -- as would allowing a guest to put forward inaccuracies or unsubstantiated extrapolations, unchallenged. So Ms Tremonti did challenge some of the statements put forward by Ms Tindall - not because, as you assert, we wanted a 'win for the CBC side' but because we wanted to make sure our audience wasn't misled or misinformed. Listening back to the conversation, I think that intent is clear."

Ms. Moroz provided a synopsis of the interview, pointing out that Ms. Tindall was able to put across her position. She pointed out that Ms. Tindall raised the issue of research:

"When asked why she made that decision, Ms Tindall responded that 'like any other mother, I've done my research as well and I've just made the best decisions I can based on what I've researched and talking with other parents and the experiences they've had. And I don't see measles as a serious threat to my children. I also don't see the measles vaccine as a valuable contribution to their health, either.'"

When Ms Tremonti asked Ms Tindall to expound on the research she had done to come to her decision, Ms Tindall responded 'reading, watching videos, talking with people who have first-hand experience with children who have had complications due to vaccines, including death.' Ms Tremonti then said 'we're talking anecdotal research, then?' Ms Tindall responded: 'Correct.'"

Ms. Moroz added that Ms. Tindall also presented her position that she did not consider measles a dangerous disease, and she was not concerned if her children were to get it. She expressed concern for the plight of Ms. Olshesky with the vulnerable child, but also pointed out that she had heard there were children who had died or were in a vegetative state because of the MMR vaccine. Ms. Moroz added that Ms. Tindall pushed back on Tremonti's probing about the scientific backing of her beliefs:

"Ms Tindall said adverse effects of the measles vaccine are 'very underreported,' adding 'you can't go to your public health office, your health unit in town and find out what complications there have been. There's just a real lack of transparency and a lack of reporting. But when you talk to parents and hear the stories of their brain dead vegetative child immediately following their vaccine, it really makes you wonder.'"

Ms. Moroz pointed out that in fact that information is available, and provided you with the appropriate agencies in [Canada](#) and the [United States](#). She thought it appropriate to clarify the matter in the course of the interview, as Ms. Tremonti did.

Ms. Moroz said she did not agree with your characterization that Ms. Tremonti was a bully nor that she attacked Ms. Tindall:

“Did she ask Ms Tindall some pointed questions? Yes, but they were not unreasonable questions. Parents who do not vaccinate their children against measles risk not only their children contracting the illness – but spreading it to others who are susceptible as well. And that has much of the public trying to understand where they are coming from. Ms Tremonti was trying to do just that – to understand Ms Tindall’s reasoning and explore her emotions. In the course of the conversation, Ms Tindall brought up information that was inaccurate or misleading, and Ms Tremonti corrected and clarified where needed – as any good journalist should do. Our job certainly entails giving voice to different perspectives on an issue, as we did here, but that does not mean allowing on-air guests to freely broadcast misinformation to the public, unchallenged or uncorrected.”

She added that Ms. Tindall herself expressed a desire to listen and to learn, but acknowledged that conversations like the one they were having were difficult because “it’s very difficult for a person who had made a decision when everybody else you talk to has made the other decision and you are automatically considered wrong.”

She strongly rejected your assertion that Ms. Tindall was set up and put on air because she was not a strong proponent on the subject.

“I take great exception to your suggestion that we ‘cherry picked’ Ms Tindall - whom you deem a ‘weak opponent’ - for what you wrote was a ‘preplanned assault’ in the place of a ‘fair debate.’ That is ridiculous - and assumes, once again, that this segment was meant as a debate on the science behind the measles vaccine. This was not a debate, but an exploration of two parents’ views and feelings. In Ms Tindall’s case, it became clear throughout the conversation that she is a mother trying to protect her children. And based on the information to which she has been exposed, she is worried about the risks of vaccinating her children -- and distrustful of the science that says the chances of dying from measles are infinitely greater than the chances of a serious adverse effect from inoculating against it.”

REVIEW

You raised two primary issues in your complaint. You thought the host bullied and mistreated one of the interviewees, Darlene Tindall. You also thought that the program was one-sided and inaccurate in its portrayal of the risks and values of the measles mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine.

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) outlines the expectations of accuracy, balance and fairness. The statement on accuracy says: “We seek out the truth in all matters of public interest. We invest our time and our skills to learn, understand and clearly explain the facts to our audience.” It calls on journalists to use their critical skills to synthesize information, and while they are not permitted to express opinion, they are expected to use their knowledge to provide conclusions where appropriate. The policy also calls for the representation of other points of view, but that is not a blanket admonition or a need to treat all views equally.

You state that it is generally accepted that the MMR vaccine is safe and effective, but the legitimate question is why should people be forced to get vaccinated if that is the case. Any question is legitimate and should be asked in a free and open society. The issue is often whether one accepts the answer. CBC journalists are not being propagandists when they convey the overwhelming evidence and public health policy that vaccination is necessary and effective. They can do so because they are conveying what is their best understanding of truth.

I spoke at some length with Dr. Natasha Crowcroft, the chief of applied immunization research at Public Health Ontario and an associate professor at the University of Toronto. One of the many interesting things she told me was that the idea of risk from measles is a very personal assessment. For most people, she said, the risk in dying from the disease is 1 in 5,000. But she also said that risk is preventable. And in the broader picture, she pointed out that there is a huge peer reviewed literature that shows the MMR vaccine prevents death, and brain damage. She explained that in places where there is low immunization, hospital wards are filled with children who have measles. She also told me that in 2011, there was an outbreak of 20 thousand cases of measles in France and there were 10 deaths.

Given the overwhelming scientific consensus and the fact that there is a robust vaccination monitoring infrastructure that ranges from the person giving the shot up through local health facilities to the province to the federal authority and up to the World Health Organization, it is not propaganda to give far more weight to data and proven facts. It may not convince you, but it does not oblige journalists to provide false equivalence to another set of ideas. Commentary and anecdotal information do not have an equivalence to scientific facts.

Ms. Moroz pointed out to you the program only provided anecdotes from people who suffered adverse effects from measles because those were the only ones they knew to be accurate. She and her programmers made a correct decision. Because of the overwhelming scientific evidence accepted by scientists, physicians and policy makers, there is no need to balance stories of measles impacts with stories of people who believe the vaccine has done irreparable harm. It would create the impression that one outcome was as likely as the other, and that simply is not the case based on the facts. That is why there is not an obligation to provide equal attention to both positions.

As for the interview itself, I think it is insulting to both the programmers and Ms. Tindall to assert she was set up and chosen because she is weak. She stated her views quite clearly. The

producer actually interviewed seven or eight individuals before asking Ms. Tindall to participate in the program. Ms. Moroz told me: "In the end, she (the producer) thought Tindall was the best spoken, and a good representation of the anti-vax worldview." I have seen the background notes for the program and the producer clearly states that Ms. Tindall is a strong and articulate person.

The stated purpose of the interview was to understand the position and thinking of someone who made the choice not to vaccinate a child. My mandate is to judge whether there was a violation of journalistic policy, not to judge the effectiveness of the interview. I asked Ms. Tindall directly how she thought the interview went. She told me she "did not feel heard." She also told me she prepared the interview thinking that the science behind her decision would not be the focus. On the other hand, the producer was under the impression that Ms. Tindall did want to talk about the science, and told her she would prepare the host to deal with that issue. It is unfortunate Ms. Tindall did not feel she got to say her piece as clearly as she would have liked, but in listening to the interview, her main points come across quite clearly: that she does not believe the science and that there is credible evidence to support her view that the vaccine can cause serious damage, and that the medical profession and "pro-vaxxers" do not listen and employ bullying tactics against people like her. She also came across as a compassionate and caring person, when faced with the dilemma of a mother of an immune compromised child.

Ms. Tindall felt she was forced to defend rather than explain her position. And listening to the interview, that seems a fair assessment. However, it is hard to fault or second guess a host for asking tough questions to get at what he or she sees as the truth of the important issues under discussion. Ms. Tremonti is known for her rigorous approach, and while you asserted several times she should not have been rigorous with this "nice Canadian," it can equally be argued it is disrespectful and condescending to treat someone with Ms. Tindall's strongly held and thought out views any differently than any other program participant.

There is no violation of policy in this program segment. In light of the mail the programmers received, they did go back and listen to the program in light of the criticism. That is a useful exercise and it might be helpful to think about ensuring the expectations of the interviewee and the program goals are clarified and understood before the interview.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Esther Enkin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent than the last.

Esther Enkin
CBC Ombudsman

cc: Jennifer Moroz, Executive Producer, The Current
Lynda Shorten, Director, Network Talk, CBC Radio
Cindy Witten, Interim Executive Director, CBC Radio and Audio
Jennifer McGuire, General Manager and Editor in Chief, CBC News