

“To place that hellhole next to our school...”: Investigating the media’s continued problematisation of the North Richmond medically supervised injecting room

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Introduction / Issues: Victoria’s first medically supervised injecting room (MSIR) has been continuously contested in the media since its implementation. This research explores the problematisation of the MSIR in the print media.

Method: A qualitative discourse analysis of Victorian print media was conducted. Print news media items were collected from July 2020 to March 2023 ($n=417$). A thematic analysis was undertaken while Bacchi’s framework ‘What’s the problem represented to be?’ directed the discourse analysis.

Key findings: The media problematised MSIR by focusing on the location, situated next to a primary school, by featuring stories of “vulnerable” children and linking the facility to local crime reports. The announcement of the MSIR trial extension triggered the campaign to move or close the facility. The reporting of a second facility attracted additional scrutiny with correspondents suggesting the negative impacts purported to be experienced in North Richmond would be duplicated. Despite the extensive coverage of the problems believed to be caused by the MSIR, most of the media coverage agreed that the facility saved lives. Finally, the voices of people who inject drugs were missing.

Discussions and Conclusions: The analysis found the school community was cast as “victims” and MSIR consumers as “villains” with little mention of the area’s pre-existing drug market. The negative media coverage suggests the facility is dangerous for the community despite tacit acknowledgment of the site’s important role in saving lives, with the predominant messaging suggests that the impact on the community may be too great.

Implications for Practice or Policy: The risk to future MSIRs resulting from this problematisation of location has a much greater impact on people who inject drugs than on the wider community. The elevation of the voices of people who inject drugs in the coverage of the MSIR would work to disrupt the representation of the problem of the location.

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