

Media Representation of Methamphetamine-Related Deaths: Exploring Links to Public Stigma and Support for Harm Reduction

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Introduction: Methamphetamine-related deaths are increasing in Australia (1). Methamphetamine use also continues to attract high levels of stigma (2) and negative attention, particularly in the media (3). Considering Media shapes perceptions, public attitudes and influence policies, this study aimed to examine whether the depiction of certain characteristics in a news article of a drug-related death (DRD) is associated with different levels of stigma and support for harm reduction.

Methods: Nationally representative Australian sample (>18 years) completed an online experimental study via Qualtrics (15 mins). Qualtrics survey (15 mins). Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight simulated news articles depicting a DRD, varying in age (older vs. younger), gender (male vs. female), and drug type (methamphetamine vs. MDMA 'ecstasy'). Primary analysis was a 2x2x2 factorial MANOVA with total stigma score and support for harm reduction as dependent variables.

Results: 1490 participants (54.7% female, mean age 45.7±17.7) found significant main effects for the manipulated variables age ($p < .001$), and drug ($p < .001$), but not gender. Stigma was higher towards representations of older vs. younger subjects ($p < .001$), and methamphetamine vs. ecstasy deaths ($p < .001$). No main effects or interaction effects for harm reduction support were significant.

Discussions and Conclusions: Older age and methamphetamine use were associated with higher stigma towards representation of a DRD. News media representations of DRD may influence public attitudes towards people who use drugs and point to the importance of improving media reporting of DRD.

Implications for Practice or Policy: This study highlights the importance of news media depictions and framing of drug-related deaths in influencing public attitudes which in turn drive drug and health policy. The study findings support the development of media guidelines for reporting DRD and targeted public campaigns to reduce stigma towards people who use methamphetamine and encourage help-seeking.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: This research was funded under Prof. Chapman's National Health and Medical Research Council Investigator grant (GNT2026380) The authors report no conflict of interest.

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