

Good Morning Ulster & The Stephen Nolan Show, Radio Ulster, 23 July 2021

Complaint

Both programmes quoted a tweet written by a doctor at the Mater Hospital in Belfast, which said:

To the 18% that haven't had the 1st covid vaccine...the Mater is full with young (in 20/30s) critically unwell, UNvaccinated COVID patients on ventilators who are now regretting their decision. Might be time for a rethink. The 3rd wave is here & u r now the most vulnerable

The tweet was read out twice in Good Morning Ulster, the first time in the context of a news story that the number of hospitalisations in Northern Ireland due to Covid-19 had doubled in a week, the second time during an interview with the Medical Director of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust which administers the Mater Hospital. The tweet was then read out again in The Stephen Nolan Show in a question to a 25 year-old man who had refused vaccination.

A listener who had pursued his concerns via subsequent Freedom of Information requests complained that inadequate steps had been taken to verify the tweet's claims, which were in fact incorrect.

Outcome

In view of the doctor's professional standing, the ECU did not regard the tweet as coming from a source for which verification would normally be appropriate, and noted that the Director of the relevant Trust had expressed no scepticism about its claims when it was put to him for comment. Accordingly, the element of the complaint which concerned verification prior to transmission was not upheld. However, it was apparent from the result of subsequent Freedom of Information requests (30 July and 18 October) that, in the context of the two programmes, the tweet had given the impression that the level of bed occupancy at the hospital by young unvaccinated Covid patients on ventilators was substantially higher than was in fact the case at the material time. In the ECU's judgement the inaccurate impression, though inadvertently conveyed, amounted to a breach of the BBC's editorial standards.

Partly upheld

Further action

The finding was reported to the management of BBC Northern Ireland and discussed with the programme-makers concerned.