



## Executive Complaints Unit



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

Thank you for your emails about editions of Good Morning Ulster and The Stephen Nolan Show which quoted a tweet written by Dr Emma Keelan, a Medical Registrar at the Mater Hospital in Belfast. I am sorry not to have responded before now; your complaint gave rise to a good deal of discussion within the BBC, which I wasn't able to draw to a conclusion as quickly as I would have wished.

Dr Keelan wrote *"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 Chris Hagan, the Medical Director of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust which administers the Mater Hospital. Mr Hagan was asked to respond to a person who had described Ms Keelan's tweet as *"scaremongering"* in the light of the increase in cases in hospitals, many of whom were unvaccinated. 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.

As your complaints concern the accuracy of the tweet and whether checks had been made by BBC journalists to verify Dr Keelan's claims, I am combining them in this investigation, in relation to the BBC's Editorial Guidelines concerning due accuracy – due meaning *"adequate and appropriate to the output, taking account of the subject and nature of the content"*.

BBC Northern Ireland have advised me that they believe Dr Keelan's tweet was intended to convey two separate observations, a) that the Mater was full with young people who were critically unwell, b) that unvaccinated patients on ventilators at the hospital were now regretting their decision not to accept the vaccine. They point to a comma in the text after "unwell". Whatever Dr Keelan's intended meaning, however, this distinction was not apparent when the tweet was quoted on air, and I believe that, on each occasion, it would have given listeners the impression that ventilators at the hospital were fully occupied with young unvaccinated patients.

I have referred to [disclosures](#) published by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust in response to requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (30 July and 18 October). These state that on 22 July, when Dr Keelan's tweet was posted, there were 60 non-invasive ventilators available in the Mater Hospital of which 12 were in use. Of these 4 were being used to treat patients aged 30-39, while none were used to treat patients aged 20-29. The hospital only has ventilators of this type. As can be seen from the responses to your FoI requests, that impression would have been inaccurate.

You have laid particular stress on the question of verification, and the BBC's Editorial Guidelines concerning due accuracy do refer to steps which may be appropriate to verify reports by third parties. In this instance, I understand Radio Ulster relied on Dr Keelan's standing as a senior doctor in respiratory medicine at The Mater, which I would normally consider acceptable in such cases unless they involved information which was contested at the time or counter-intuitive. In addition, they point out that (as mentioned above) the tweet, and the suggestion that it was an example of scaremongering, were put to Dr Chris Hagan who did not call it into question. All in all, therefore, I do not think I can fault the programme-makers for not taking what would have been extraordinary steps to verify the information in the tweet – but the fact remains that the impression given on air was significantly inaccurate, and I am therefore upholding your complaint in that respect.

I hope you will accept my apology, on behalf of the BBC, for the breach of standards you have identified in connection with these programmes. I attach a version of the finding which will be published on [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) later today, and which you will be able to find at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/contact/recent-ecu>. As this finding represents the BBC's final view on the matter, it is open to you to ask the broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, to consider the complaint. You can find details of how to contact Ofcom and the procedures it will apply at <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/how-to-report-a-complaint>. Alternatively, you can write to Ofcom, Riverside House, 2a Southwark Bridge Road, London SE1 9HA, or telephone either 0300 123 3333 or 020 7981 3040. Ofcom acknowledges all complaints received.

Yours sincerely



Fraser Steel  
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