

# **MEDIA AND THE METHADONE DRUG SUBSTITUTION THERAPY (MDST): A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NEWS ON METHADONE IN BERITA HARIAN AND HARIAN METRO IN 2008.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Malaysia media has been covering the issues of Methadone Drug Substitution Therapy (MDST) since the year 2005, when the government decided to give free syringes, condom and methadone as part of a “harm-reduction” programme for the drug addicts. After a number of years, the public’s perception of methadone users and the treatment has not improved much. The public still misconceived the treatment as just another alternative to meet the addiction habits. Question arose whether the media has been supporting the MDST programme in their news based on the style of news writing and the information offered in the news. Therefore, the paper will examine the contents and writing style of news on methadone treatment by Berita Harian and Harian Metro in throughout year 2008 to determine their level of support on the programme. The study found out that Berita Harian was dedicated at focusing their news on methadone to on the awareness and the treatment part of the methadone maintenance, using sources from ministry and health practitioners. Harian Metro, however, preferred to represent methadone in the form of crime news, and using enforcement bodies as their sources. Although both newspapers has shown their support to the methadone treatment programme, but methadone treatment did suffered from this stereotype of news values practised by most tabloid newspapers when it often fall under the theme of crime. It was feared that associating methadone with crime and harmful drugs would create a perception that methadone is just another type of harmful drugs and not a therapy drug or medicine for the addicts.*

**Keywords:** Methadone treatment, drugs, news coverage, public policy.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Methadone Drug Substitution Therapy (MDST) is a programme launched by government in year 2005 to target heroin addict. The programme provides drug addicts with legal access to synthetic opiod (a safe substitute drugs) that stops craving for drugs and the withdrawal symptoms allowing addicts to carry on with life. Although the media have been covering methadone programme run by the government, due to the stigma towards drug addicts, the public’s perception on methadone and its users has not improved much. The public still misconceived the treatment as just another alternative to meet the addiction habits. Question arose whether the media has been doing their best in supporting the MDST programme in their news based on the style of news writing and the information offered in the news articles. Therefore, the paper will examine the contents of the news on methadone treatment as reported by *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro* in year 2008 and 2009 to determine their level of support on the programme. This will be done by examining the trend of news writing style by focusing to any news mentioning methadone in the newspapers understudy by looking at the component of news such as the use of official sources, the newspaper inclination, whether positive, negative or neutral and its style of writing, whether direct reporting or observation.

### ***Methadone and the news***

Malaysia media began their coverage on methadone treatment as early as 2001 as the programme has been used worldwide to help drug addicts kick the habit. Malaysian media began covering this issue more seriously in year 2005 when the government decided to give free syringes, condom and methadone as part of a 'harm-reduction' programme for the drug addicts.

The media which is consistently giving its best to report methadone in the name of social responsibility was probably the Bernama. D.J Paul (2009) of Bernama tried his best to give an accurate and positive coverage on methadone. He quoted Professor Dr Mohamad Hussain Habil, Addiction Specialist and Consultant Psychiatrist with University Malaya Medical Centre's Department of Psychological Medicine by saying that said the MDST is 'probably the only long term pragmatic approach in helping the addicts get on with life and at the same time help alleviate many of the problems associated with drug addiction - HIV infection, criminal behaviour and social decadence' in his news article. The news article too said the programme which initially covers about covers 5,000 addicts will be extended to some 75,000 addicts 2015 due to the success of the programme.

DJ Paul (2009) in another news articles explained in great details on how methadone is consumed by the addicts. He explain that MDST was an office based treatment with addicts voluntarily coming in to receive their oral dosage of methadone (in liquid form) during the induction period and taking the substitute drug at home during the maintenance period. The personnel who attend to these addicts will also monitor the treatment progress.

In another BERNAMA news article, also by D.J Paul (2009), quoted Dr Mohd Khafidz Hj Mohd Ishak, the president of Persatuan Insaf Murni (an NGO affiliated with Malaysian Aids Council and the one that conducts MDST) by saying that addicts taking methadone daily in liquid form to manage their addiction as similar to 'how we manage other diseases of the body for example, diabetes'.

An earlier BERNAMA report (2002) was about how methadone would help to reduce the spread of HIV among addicts and their family. The news quoted The Malaysian Association For Reformed Addicts (Pengasih) president Yunus Pathi Mohd as saying that there were about 42,000 chronic drug addicts who were infected with HIV (at the time of the report); the use of methadone was felt crucial in efforts to reduce the number of addicts.

Not all is beautiful about methadone in the news. In compared to the Malaysian media, there were a considerably amount of 'bad press' on methadone treatment in the Western media. During the early days of the introduction of the methadone maintenance programme dated back to 1970s, there was a report claiming that the Western media were in a constant search to put an end to the programme. Brecher (1972) said editors and politicians preyed on 'unfortunate methadone incidents' to fill newspapers headlines at their attempt to 'sabotage' the programme and diminished their usefulness.

Belluck (2003) found out that articles appearing in prominent newspapers in 2002 and 2003, including those in the *New York Times*, have described methadone as a 'killer drug' that is 'widely abused and dangerous'. The reports said diversion, abuse, and deaths associated with

many opioid medications, including methadone, have been the subject of front-page news. These alarming reports arose from an apparent increase in deaths among persons using the medication.

An article published by the *International Journal of Drug Policy* (1998) explained how media misrepresentation was widely accepted amongst workers in the drug and alcohol field as one of harm reduction's greatest barriers. The article said workers face the dilemma of whether to be proactive and actively discuss harm reduction messages or quietly continue with their work hoping that valuable messages will be disseminated effectively, with little controversy. According to the article, although methadone treatment had been a major success in Australia, it received much resistance from the tabloid press as a waste of public money due to a number of methadone-related deaths reported by the media.

A recent study on metaphors in relations to methadone in New York newspapers by Suzanne (2006) shown that the image of methadone has not improved much. After examining three newspapers, the study found out that that methadone itself is a metaphor for heroin.

Blogger [Maryna Reshetnyak](#) (2009) reproduced a comment by a methadone user who expressed his concern about the representation of methadone in the newspaper of his country, Ukraine, in a weblog. Pavel Kutsev said that situation with substitution therapy was getting worse due to the upcoming elections in Ukraine and all methadone programmes were under threat.

In the Rising Voices blog, Kutsev was quoted raising a question:

*How would you like this newspaper headline: "Methadone Monsters Ruled by the Hand of Evil?" This is from one of the newspapers from the Sumy region. So we are quite concerned about all this."*

### **Media Representation of Drug Use**

Media play an important role in disseminating news and information for the Malaysian public. Apart from popular medium such as electronic media, and the World Wide Web, Malaysian public still seeks news from the newspapers, both mainstreams newspapers such as *Berita Harian*, *Utusan Malaysia*, *The Star*, and *The New Straits Times* and tabloid newspapers such as *Harian Metro* and *Kosmo*. *Harian Metro*, for example, is a Bahasa Malaysia tabloid newspaper with the highest daily circulation of 338,552 copies followed by *Berita Harian* at 183,187 copies per day (*Harian Metro*, 2009). These newspapers for example contribute towards forming some of the public opinion and encourage social change. Thus, to understand the media representation of methadone, it is necessary to understand how the drugs and substance abuse were presented in the media.

Many people are well aware of media influence in shaping public opinion. This is because according to George Gerbner's analysis, media was agenda setter of our culture (cited by Barcus & Jankowski, 1975). Realizing this fact in Britain, British Government utilized media in their campaign to fight illegal use of drugs (Davies, 1988). These campaigns have been based on an indirect model of behaviour change. In this case media was used to create awareness, increase and maintain the knowledge on specific health issues as well as indirectly trying to change public attitudes and behaviour on health care. Therefore, the British government had set

the agenda and used the media to execute their plan. In most of the country in the world, the media roles and function would usually align with the ruling government (Faridah Ibrahim, 2007). According to Faridah Ibrahim (2007), in Malaysia, the government considered the newspapers and other media as the medium for distributing information to the public on behalf of the government. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily true when it comes to the drugs related issues.

According to Taylor (2008), the media around the world have the common theme when it comes to reporting news on drugs. Most of the time theme would include something negative about the drug, the drug's users, and also the suppliers. The media tends to exaggerate, distort, sensationalize, and sometimes the news can also be inaccurate (Coomber, Morri, & Dunn, 2000). The newspapers would usually associate drug related news with criminal activities (Elliott & Chapman, 2000). These portrayals serve to add to public's belief that drugs are a menace to the society. Even though media around the world had an unspoken understanding when it comes to drugs issues, it could pose to be a disadvantage to the government when they need to introduce harm reduction method in countering drugs misused. This is because the public for a long period of time had been educated to see only negative things about drug related news.

Furthermore, journalists have their stereotype when dealing with drug issues. Journalists would try to organize the social reality that would suit the image of drug related issues. Schudson (1991) believed that we should examine the cultural given within which everyday interaction happens in the first place for these were source of the generalized images and stereotypes employed by the journalist in their routine work. Again, these issues are usually negative in nature.

The media also would choose to carry on with news that has more values than the other. As far as journalists, chief reporters, sub editors, news editors, feature writers, columnist and the likes concern, the news that has more values would be commercial news (Faridah Ibrahim, 2003). This means that the reporters change their style of writing to suit it with the current commercial needs.

Newspapers had been the source for news for many since the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Newspapers had braved the years of yellow journalism and sensationalism, but public still have much trust on the news articles. Even though the style of writing news articles had changed over the years, but the newspaper's main concern had forever been whether they could have bigger and wider circulation. Therefore in order to sell these news, it raises concerns regarding the inaccurate, partial and over dramatized manner in which issues are often presented to the public (Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2006). Thus, those readers who only have the newspapers as their source of information may be misinformed.

However there was also research that relates media to the problem of drug use (Barcus & Jankowski, 1975). It was said that the contents of media in advertisement, television entertainment, and songs lyrics suggest the use of drugs. This was because media are part of an environment, which is composed of many factors that led to social change. Barcus & Jankowski (1975) realized that the existence of media perform certain functions in the society for the individual, for sub-groups of the society, and for the culture as a whole. Therefore, we should

realize that these functions have the tendency to influence society and could become the contributing factors in social change.

The selection of news in the newspaper would also depend on news value, for example Manning (2006) had done a research to comparative analysis between volatile substance abuse (VSA) and ecstasy. The research analyzed the reporting of ecstasy- related death and those associated with VSA. What was interesting about the findings of the research was that ecstasy got more news coverage than VSA, even though VSA death- related story were prove to be higher than ecstasy. The reason ecstasy got more news coverage was because there were more people championing ecstasy causes than VSA.

Ecstasy was portrayed as dangerous and as threat to everyone. Furthermore because Manning (2006), suggested looking at politics of the news source to understand why ecstasy had more coverage than VSA. This was because the political marginal group was championing the ecstasy course were able to secure access to news media agenda in particular situations, and yet the usual routines of news production frequently privilege the news definitions offered by the powerful (Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994; Manning, 2001). This could also prove apart from the news value, in dealing with drug issues, the driving force behind the issues should be powerful enough to command media attention.

Manning (2006), identifies four symbolic frameworks in organizing the news coverage. He believed that to understand the substance misuse in terms of how dimensions such as location, behaviors and identities, substance images, and cause and consequences are constructed. Based on this framework he concluded that home is where the drug abuse would usually happen, and it was also associated with crime and violence, the image of the abuser would be painted to be negative, and it will lead to social disorder.

### ***Methadone and the society***

How does the Malaysian society react towards MDST? DJ. Paul (2009) highlighted a concern by Professor Dr Mohamad Hussain Habil on public's perception of the MDST programme. Dr Mohamad was quoted as saying that the society were worried that MDST programme is just "substituting one addiction with another", or to some extent, regards it as "euthanasia for eradicating a social menace". There is also a presence of cultural belief that treating drugs abuser with more drugs will not solve any problem (BERNAMA, 2006)

DJ Paul (2009) quoted Vice-president of Addiction Medicine Association of Malaysia (AMAM) Datuk Dr Lim Boon Sho who said "there is a serious miscommunication on the substitute drug". Lim was commenting on a number of his patients who was nabbed by the police even though they were under MDST. The same report quoted AMAM's president Dr Steven Chow as saying that addiction was a "stubborn disease" and often involves "stubborn patients" and thus was not going to be easy to confide the addicts to come forward and seek treatment voluntarily. Another problem highlighted by the report was the lack of financial support or resources from the government for the private practitioners to be part of the MDST programme.

Gomez (2009) highlighted challenges faced by the doctors involved in the MDST programme. The report said many doctors had stopped helping heroin addicts get rid of their habit by giving them milder replacement drugs because they were getting a bad name as they were perceived as 'supporting the problem rather than helping the addicts'. Gomez (2009) quoted Professor Dr Mohamad Hussain Habil University Malaya Medical Centre psychological medicine department addiction specialist as saying that due to the 'bad perception of the society', only two from the first batch of 52 doctors trained in using methadone in 2003, are still employing the therapy.

DJ. Paul (2009) too had highlighted the same issue in his report. He quoted Dr Musa Jantan from Melaka on the problem of doctors treating drug addicts as being 'disturbed' not only by the society, but the authority and the politicians. Dr Musa said his patients have been the victim of 'danger from the society' and have been blamed for every petty crimes happening in the neighbourhood, when in reality, crimes can be done by anyone, not only the drug addicts.

Haliza Hassan (2009) quoted the National Anti-**Drug** Agency (AADK) deputy director (operation) Prof Dr Mahmood Nazar Mohamed that there was a need to educate the society to change the stigma towards those who are who has 'fallen into the social problems' 'black hole' so they would find the courage to come out from it. Prof Dr Mahmood too made a call to the media to play a more positive role in social issue, including drugs issues, avoid the coverage meant to punish.

### ***Agenda Setting Theory***

The agenda setting theory predicts that the amount of attention given to an issue in the media affects the level of importance assigned to it by the public (Roadman, 2008). According to agenda setting theory, the media tell the public what issues to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In other words, the media dictate the key issues that circulate in the public agendas by discussing these issues repeatedly and by drawing attention to them. Although the theory was more popular in the examination on political agenda, it can also be study in relation of media presentation on substance use. It can be argues that if the media repeatedly communicate messages about the risks related to substance use (drugs), the public will consider this issue as more and more important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177).

According to Goode and Ben Yehuda (1994), media report can trigger panic immediately, but the panic would disappear as quickly. This most probably because, if it is really bad the public would most probably follow-up on the story with other sources and the anxiety would be clear once the truth is revealed. Moral panic can affect those whose deviant conduct appals onlookers so powerfully precisely because it relates to personal fears and unconscious wishes (Garland, 2008).

Garland (2008), also believed that mass media are typically the prime mover and the prime beneficiaries that contribute to the public's moral panic. Referring to the commercial news that was discussed earlier, Jock Young (1971) noted that the commercial media have an institutionalized need to create moral panics. In another word, the media would intentionally create moral panic by generating news to ensure the news would appeal to the public.

## METHODOLOGY

The research was based on the analysis of two Bahasa Malaysia newspapers, *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro* and whether these newspapers were supportive toward the MDST programme run by the Government. These newspapers were chosen as both are the most read Bahasa Malaysia newspapers.

The researcher analyzed two years worth of news considering the words mention in both newspapers. Based on the two years data collection there were 35 news news articles mentioned the word methadone in the news articles, 12 for *Berita Harian*, and 10 for *Harian Metro*.

As mention earlier only news articles with the word methadone in the newspapers will qualify to be analysed. In analysing the news articles, the researchers focus on categories that includes the themes of news articles, the sources of the news article, the style of writing, the news inclination, the positioning of methadone in the news and whether the newspaper was deemed supporting the MDST program.

The news will be categories under 'Crime', 'Treatment', 'Awareness' or 'Others' to identify the themes of the news. This is to identify the main themes of news on methadone as projected by the newspapers understudy. The source category was divided between the 'Ministry', the 'Health practitioner', the 'Enforcer' such as the Police and the AADK, the non-governmental organisation labelled as 'NGO', the 'Audit department', the 'Academician', the 'Religious department' and the 'Journalist'. This is important to determine the usage of sources of methadone news, as it would also determine whether the news articles was written based on an official sources or based on journalist's own observation and investigation.

Apart from that the researchers also analyse the style of writing the news articles. The style of writing would prove whether the news article was written based on direct reporting or the journalist's observation. In this case direct reporting means that the journalist wrote the story based on information they got from the government (or other official sources) and literally transcribe it back to the general public.

The researchers also were looking at the report inclination of the articles whether it was positive, negative or neutral. The researchers conceptualize positive in term of whether the articles are supporting the government's effort in MDST program for example words used to describe methadone just as it was, meaning methadone as treatment drug for addiction (Valentine, 2007). Negative was conceptualize according to the words used to mislead the readers into believing that methadone was just another harmful drug introduced by the government to encourage more drug abuse. The third inclination identified as neutral was based on if the articles just mention about methadone but does not incline towards positive or negative.

The news were also analysed and categories under 'Main story', 'Sub-story', or 'Mere mentioning' to see whether methadone was the main focus of the news articles or just it was mentioned as an additional information in the news articles. These news articles were later categorised as 'Support' or 'Lack of support' based on whether methadone has been positively portrayed based on the amount of information offered on methadone treatment.

## FINDINGS

### *Theme of Methadone News*

The study revealed that *Berita Harian* has an equal share of themes namely "Treatment", "Awareness", and "Others" when covering news on methadone (4 news articles each, or 33.33 percent respectively). The main theme of news on methadone in *Harian Metro* was "Crime" (4 news articles or 40 per cent) followed by "Treatment" (3 news articles or 30 per cent).

**Table 1:** Types of news on methadone reported by both newspapers

	<i>Berita Harian</i>	%	<i>Harian Metro</i>	%
	f		f	
Crime	-	-	4	40
Treatment	4	33.33	3	30
Awareness	4	33.33	2	20
Others	4	33.33	1	10
Total	12	100	10	100

### *Sources of News*

The study found that *Berita Harian* has dutifully reported news on methadone from "Ministry" sources, and the "Health practitioners", showing how *Berita Harian* has remained objective in its reporting on the substitute drug therapy by reporting from the authority and the health practitioners' point of view (3 news articles or 25 per cent respectively). Consistent to the earlier finding, *Harian Metro* has most its news reported from the "Enforcer" point of views (4 news articles or 40 per cent), followed by three news reported having no official sources but used the journalist's observation and investigation as the main source (3 news articles or 30 per cent).

**Table 2:** Sources of news on methadone

	<i>Berita Harian</i>	%	<i>Harian Metro</i>	%
	f		F	
Ministry	3	25	-	-
Health practitioner	3	25	2	20
Enforcer (Police, AADK, etc)	1	8.3	4	40
NGO	2	16.6	-	-
Audit	-	-	-	-
Academician	-	-	1	10
Religious department	-	-	-	-
Journalist	3	25	3	30
Total	12	100	10	100



### Style of Writing

*Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro*, being newspapers which were closely-linked with the government, have been trying hard to be objective in their reporting, and this is reflected in their style of news writing whereby both newspapers are practising direct reporting when it comes to news articles on methadone. Although both newspapers did use some observation and investigation without acknowledging official sources when writing news articles which have an association with the methadone, *Berita Harian* has slightly more articles using direct reporting compared to *Harian Metro*.

**Table 3:** The news articles style of writing

	<i>Berita Harian</i>	%	<i>Harian Metro</i>	%
	f		f	
Direct reporting	8	66.6	6	60
Observation	4	33.3	4	40
Total	12	100	10	100

### Inclination Of The News Articles

In studying the inclination of the news articles, the study found out news on methadone in *Berita Harian* are either positive or neutral, while *Harian Metro* has most news on methadone in potive way. Although only one news article on methadone in each newspaper was written in negative ways, but this percentage on *Harian Metro* was slightly higher (10 percent).

**Table 6:** Inclination of the news articles

	<i>Berita Harian</i>	%	<i>Harian Metro</i>	%
	f		f	
Positive	6	50	8	80
Negative	1	8.3	1	10
Neutral	5	41.6	1	10
Total	12	100	10	100

### Positioning Of The Methadone In The News Articles

In the positioning of methadone in the news articles, it was found out that *Harian Metro* has more news on methadone positioned as the main story (6 news articles of 60 per cent), while *Berita Harian* have most news on methadone positioned as main-story (6 news, 50 per cent). *Berita Harian* have news which mere mentioning methadone (2 news articles or 16 per cent) when *Harian Metro* has none.

**Table 8:** Positioning of the methadone news

	<i>Berita Harian</i>		<i>Harian Metro</i>	
	f	%	f	%
Main story	4	33.3	6	60
Sub-story	6	50	4	40
Mere mentioning	2	16.6	-	-
Total	12	100	10	100

### Newspapers' Support

In determining whether the newspapers understudy have been supportive towards the MDST programme by the government, it was found out that both newspapers were supportive towards the programme, with *Berita Harian* has a slightly lower percentage of news supportive towards the methadone programme compared to *Harian Metro* as the newspaper has a number of news mere mentioning methadone treatment without any attempts to explain more about what is methadone treatment.

**Table 9:** Newspapers' support on methadone treatment

	<i>Berita Harian</i>		<i>Harian Metro</i>	
	f	%	f	%
Support	10	83.3	10	100
Lack of support	2	16.6	-	-
Total	12	100	10	100

## CONCLUSION

*Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro*, although the former was a mainstream newspaper, and latter, a tabloid, are both newspapers linked to the government and both are the most read Malay newspapers in the country, therefore their power in creating public opinion is undeniable. This approved the agenda setting theory, where the media tried their best to channel the government's

agenda ó to communicate to the public on the importance of the methadone as therapy drug for heroin addicts. *Berita Harian*, especially, was dedicated at focusing their news on methadone to create awareness on the drug therapy and to explain methadone as a treatment to the drug addicts. To achieve this, the newspaper has most of its news articles on methadone written from the perspective of the related Ministry and the health practitioners, using direct reporting in their style of writing. However, there are still a number of news articles written by neglecting official sources by *Berita Harian*, as well as a number of articles fall under õsub-storyö and õmere mentioningö without further attempt to explain the details of methadone treatment. Being a tabloid newspaper, it is common for *Harian Metro* to write news on drugs by relating it to crime, and using enforcement as their sources. The study revealed that methadone treatment too had suffered from this stereotype of news values practised by the tabloid newspapers. It is feared that *Harian Metro*'s methadone treatment association with crime and harmful drugs would create a perception that methadone is just another type of harmful drugs and not a therapy drug or medicine, especially when the newspaper is the most read Bahasa Malaysia newspaper which has a great influence on the Malay readers. Although the writing style has shown that *Harian Metro* has been supportive towards the government's methadone treatment, there were still a number of news articles neglecting official sources, and putting in journalist assumptions. It is a concern to the researcher that the journalists stay being objective by using official sources in their news articles to avoid news being written out of assumption leading the public dangerously misinformed by making more attempts to further explains the importance of methadone treatment.

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