

Headspace

...drugs from the left field

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Every picture tells a story

I should begin by making absolutely clear that the photo on the left has nothing to do with drug use; it is an entirely unrelated picture of a young man in blue work overalls. The picture on the right is, of course, about drug use – it is the familiar stock image, a young woman injecting herself, nasty-looking bruises up her arm. Photo libraries are able to provide DrugScope with plenty of images of the second kind. But it is virtually impossible to find a photograph of somebody who looks like they are contentedly or gainfully employed (or in education or training or simply happy) that can be used in a context that would suggest that they have a history of substance misuse problems.

I know this because DrugScope recently produced two leaflets on employment – for employers and service providers respectively – as part of a project that we are being funded to deliver by Trust for London. We were not allowed to use any of the pictures that we originally selected to illustrate these leaflets, which included the image of the man in blue overalls above. It took a further month to nail down six photographs that we could get permission to use, and three of these all featured the same woman.

Now, it is understandable that photographic models generally do not want their images to be used in a way that may imply things about them that are not true (or are true, but which they would rather not be publically identified with). Photo libraries generally include proscriptions on using images in a way that depicts the person photographed in a way that associates them with a 'potentially sensitive subject matter, including, but not limited to mental and physical health issues, social issues, sexual or implied sexual activity or preferences, substance abuse, crime,



physical or mental abuse or ailments'.

We approached several photo libraries to see if they could help. We soon realised it wouldn't be easy to find the kind of pictures we needed – positive images of people in employment. An e-mail copied to us from someone at one photo-library, declared 'personally, I think it's a no-no. Even if a picture is model released, no-one (even if it says posed by models) wants to be portrayed as someone with either a drug or alcohol problem'. Nor do most photo libraries currently see a need to stock or provide images of people who are former drug or alcohol users that portray them in a positive light – presumably because there is not the demand.

A statement of 'standard license prohibitions' for use of such photographs explains that where an image 'undisputedly reflects the model or person in such potentially sensitive subject matter...the content may be used or displayed in a manner that portrays

the model or person in the same context and to the same degree depicted in the Content itself'. Translated from the legalese, this means that we could have filled the leaflet for employers with images of people with syringes in their arms or simply looking unwell, desperate or menacing – but that might have undermined its message, which was that 'stereotypes about people with a past history of drug use are common...we want to help you to avoid this by looking at people with previous experience of drug and alcohol use differently'.

It is often commented that service providers and service users may find it difficult to 'picture' people in recovery. If we are serious about tackling stigma, then we should be concerned that there appear to be literally no pictures of recovery in the photo libraries that supply the images that illustrate our narratives and guidance around drug use and recovery.