

Review: Reporting of military background of doctor accused of sexual assault

May 2, 2011

REVIEW

CBCNews.ca [published a story](#) February 22, 2011, on two doctors charged with drugging and sexually assaulting a woman. Its story focused on the military involvement of one of the accused, Dr. Amitabh Chauhan.

The story documented Chauhan's military and medical background, but paid particular attention to the details of his military service starting in 1997. He had ceased pilot training in 2005, departed the military in 2007 and had been performing a variety of duties as a reservist since 2008, the Canadian Forces said. The report noted that Chauhan was a post-graduate student in plastic surgery at McMaster University in Hamilton.

The report noted that the Canadian Forces was cooperating with police in the investigation that had yielded charges against Chauhan and another doctor of gang sexual assault and administering a noxious substance involving an attack on a woman at a Toronto hotel February 13.

The complainant, Charles Haydar, wrote February 23 that the emphasis on Chauhan's military background was "irrelevant and unfair to the thousands of men and women who wear their country's uniform proudly and with distinction."

Haydar wrote: "The report is the worst sort of disingenuousness, as it uses facts, which are irrelevant, to play upon discredited prejudices; in this case, the prejudices of those who hold the military in contempt." He said CBC didn't understand how minor Chauhan's reservist role was in the military as it made such grave connections.

Esther Enkin, the executive editor of CBC News, wrote Haydar on March 1 to note Chauhan's 14-year military involvement. She said the provision of career background was common in prominent crime cases.

Haydar wrote back March 3 to ask for a review and to enquire why CBC had included military information in its report but not provided information on Chauhan's medical education and practice.

CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices do not directly address the issue in question, but provide some guidance on principles of court and criminal coverage. The policy says that identification of those accused in principle *"contributes to the openness of legal proceedings and serves the public interest."*

To achieve fairness, the policy calls for reporting that treats *"individuals and organizations with openness and respect. We are mindful of their rights. We treat them even-handedly."*

CONCLUSION

I agree with CBC News that the reporting of personal and professional background is an essential ingredient in stories about high-profile crime cases.

I do not agree that mentioning his military involvement cast aspersions or damaged those who perform such service for the country unless there could be established a direct connection between the crime and any environment for it in the military. Professionals are often charged with crimes, but that doesn't tarnish those who hold similar positions.

But it's also important that information delivers context and be relevant.

The story carried nine sentences concerning the accused's military background, two concerning the charges against him, and one concerning his current career. Its heavy emphasis on Chauhan's military background didn't make a strong journalistic link between those activities and the crime.

I believe there was room for improvement in this story to place emphasis differently, but there was no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman