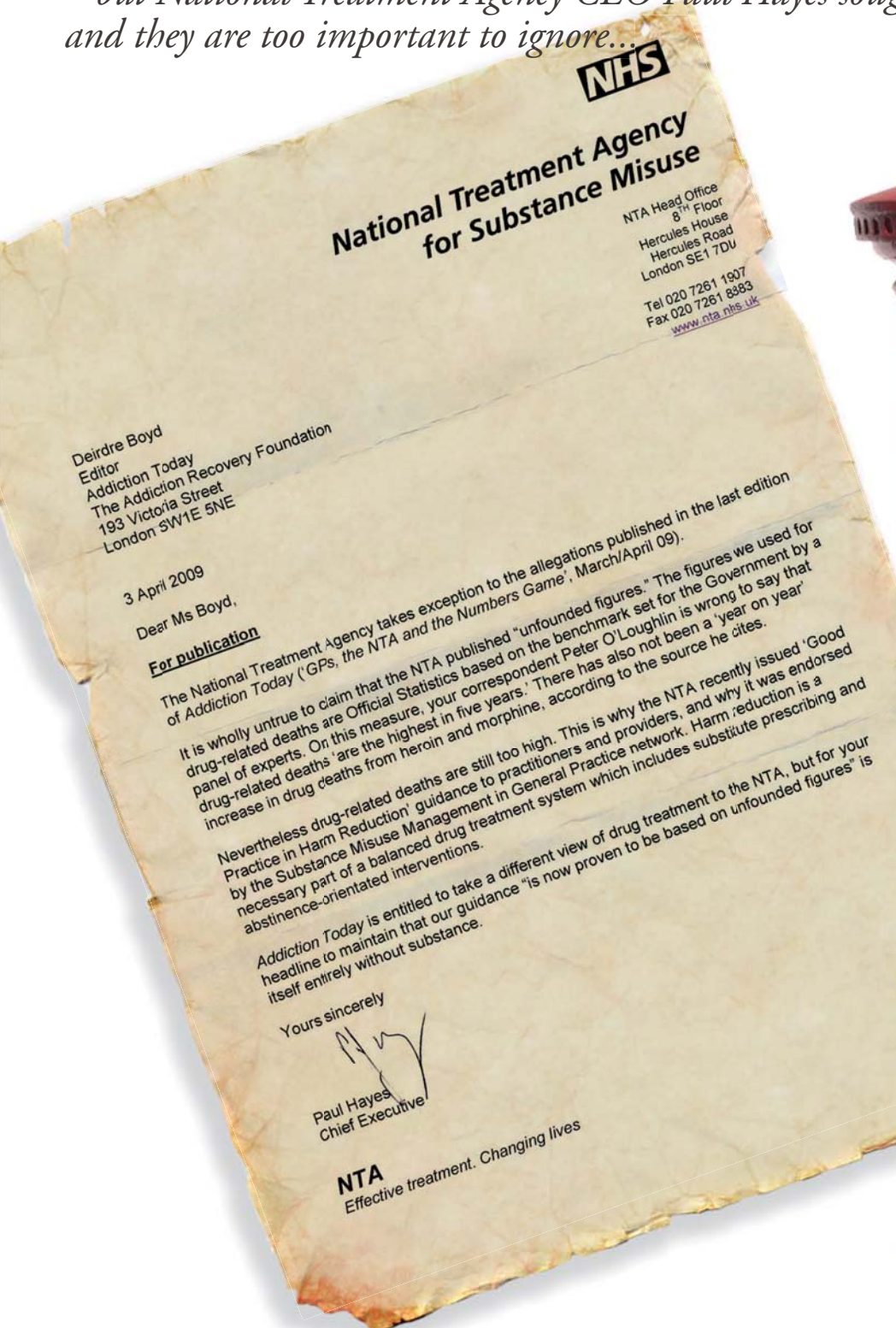


## THE NTA, PAUL HAYES AND DRUG DEATHS

*Addiction Today did not plan to continue in this issue on the topic of drug deaths – but National Treatment Agency CEO Paul Hayes sought explanation of the facts and they are too important to ignore...*



Dear Paul,

Thank you for your letters – one “for publication” and a second “not for publication” – of 3 April.

Peter O’Loughlin’s letter gives you an in-depth explanation of drug-related deaths. I appreciate you wish to disseminate a particular perception but from this you will understand how a statement that the facts are “wholly untrue” is itself untrue.

*Addiction Today* does not, as you claim, take a different view of drug treatment to the NTA’s stated ambitions. The dilemma is that this shared view has not been implemented.

After seven years of solidly supporting the NTA (is this what you mean by “editorial preconceptions” in your “not for publication” letter?), I was moved by events such as closures of lifesaving services and heartbreaking calls from people seeking help from this charity, to draw impediments to the NTA’s attention. Sadly, instead of working on improvements, it seems to be a case of shooting/vilifying the messenger.

Your “not for publication” letter states that the NTA “would be happy to respond to all the issues raised by *Addiction Today* in the web posting under the heading *Questions the NTA must answer* if we had any confidence that our answers would be published”. Please do respond – I have been waiting since October 2008 for the NTA to give us an answer for print.

The above answers the first two paragraphs of your second letter, which reiterates points from your letter opposite, but I must correct the inaccurate statement that the NTA finds it difficult to “get a fair hearing in the pages of *Addiction Today*”. It very much does get a fair hearing – I suspect your complaint is that it is heard so knowledgeable that we ask for inaccuracies to be corrected.

This comment also applies to your third paragraph about not taking NTA press releases/“articles” unquestioningly. I could say that accuracy is the basic standard of journalism to which this charity publication rigorously adheres, but it goes far deeper than that. This charity was founded to help people recover from addictive disorders, and many of its trustees and staff are in recovery themselves, dedicating their time and effort to helping others. It is for this core purpose that the charity advocates for effective treatment and facts leading to accurate, helpful overviews instead of misleading diversions.

With regard to your statement about a regular NTA page in *Addiction Today* such as Alcohol Concern, EATA and DrugScope, I offered the NTA an open invitation for seven years. This still stands, subject to the usual editorial norms of fact-checking.

It is so sad that the NTA is unwilling to take valid points on board, especially when lives are at stake and those points were and are made in a spirit of assistance; instead responses have been denial, unfounded claims and other spin-doctor *modus operandi*.

You make claims in your second letter about our rejection of a NTA article from your £90,000\*pa director of communications and head of research for inclusion in *Addiction Today*: if you read my rejection email, you know that it was rejected instead on grounds of inaccuracy, with those errors clearly described.

The rest of your letter seems also to be about one-sided PR for the NTA, so I will not reiterate points other than to say this charity’s management committee and I welcome the NTA response to the questions we have been asking since October 2008.

Yours sincerely,

Deirdre

## WHEN IS A DRUG RELATED DEATH NOT A DRUG RELATED DEATH?

In his letter dated 3 April, Paul Hayes makes the serious allegation that I am wrong to say that drug-related deaths are at their highest in five years. He points out that “drug related deaths are official statistics based on benchmark set for the Government by a panel of experts”. I assume that he is referring to the UK official definition for drug-related deaths mentioned by Jon Hibbs, NTA director of communications, in his email posting of 28 February and which appears on page 85 of Health Statistics Quarterly (HSQ39) dated August last. This reads: “deaths where the underlying cause is poisoning, drug abuse or drug dependence and where any of the substances controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) are involved”.

In his email, Mr Hibbs states that the claim by the NTA that “drug-related deaths have gone down in recent years” is based on drug-related deaths for England cited by the ONS in HSQ 39. However, that report – as its title indicates – is for deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales for 2003-7.

On page 84 of HSQ39, table 2 records all deaths from drug-related poisoning from which we extract the following relevant statistics:

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Heroin and Morphine	696	751	842	713	829
Methadone	201	219	220	241	325
Cocaine	129	154	176	190	196
Amphetamines	81	80	103	92	97
MDMA/Ecstasy	50	43	58	48	47
Cannabis	11	19	19	17	12
GHB	6	1	4	7	9
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>1174</b>	<b>1267</b>	<b>1422</b>	<b>1308</b>	<b>1515</b>

In view of the above, I stand by my claim that drug-related deaths in accordance with the UK official definition are at their highest for five years

I repeat my allegation that the claim by the NTA in its document Good Practice in Harm Reduction that “drug related deaths have gone down in recent years” is unfounded, misleading and inexplicable given that the NTA document was published some three months after the release of these figures from the ONS.

Even more inexplicable are the figures provided by Hibbs in his email to *Addiction Today* dated 23 February wherein he provides the following figures for deaths from drug misuse:

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
	1313	1415	1506	1469	1479

In his email dated 28 February 2009, he states that the source of those figures is to be found in table 3 on page 85 of HSQ39. But reference to that table reveals the following:

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
	1,432	1,495	1,608	1,573	1,604

A possible explanation for the differences between the figures I quoted and those on which the NTA based its claim is that the NTA confined the figures it opts to use to England alone. If that is the case, it should have been made clear in the document and in Mr Hayes’ letter.

If the NTA feels justified in persisting in its claim by confining its figures to England, even then the single ‘blip’ between 2005 and 2006 does not justify sweeping and misleading claims – especially when there was another increase in drug-related deaths in England between 2006 and 2007.

I ask Mr Hayes to withdraw his allegation and, more importantly, to acknowledge that the NTA claim that “drug-related deaths have gone down in recent years” should be withdrawn and replaced with a more factual document, which explains that they increased between 2003 and 2007, with a one-off reduction in 2006 due to a spike in 2005.

Peter O’Loughlin  
The Eden Lodge Practice