

ADVERTISING

# Voices For Freedom billboards taken down after Advertising Standards Authority deems them 'misleading and irresponsible'

28/04/2022 Molly Swift



Complaints about three different Voices For Freedom billboards were upheld. Photo credit: Advertising Standards Authority, Getty Images

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has found multiple Voices For Freedom billboards were misleading and socially irresponsible.

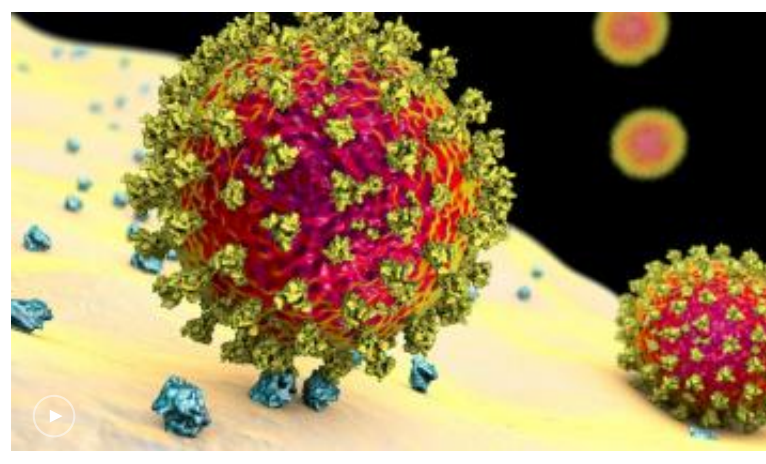
Complaints about three Voices For Freedom billboards were upheld and one was not in the latest round of ASA decisions, released to the public on Thursday.

A prominent anti-vaccination group, Voices For Freedom claims to be non-political and focused on free speech issues. However, they have actively campaigned against the COVID-19 vaccine, mandates and lockdowns, and have repeatedly been accused of spreading misinformation.

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The group's billboards have been taken down in the past after the company that ran the advertisements heard the group was [harassing people](#) trying to get vaccines. However, this time it was the content of the ads that caused the billboards to be pulled down.

The three main issues found in the billboards were breaching social responsibility, truthful presentation and advocacy advertising.

One of the billboards ordered to be taken down showed a photo of a child wearing a face mask overlaid with the text: "Masks for kids: Safe? Effective? Yeah, Nah."



Photo credit: Advertising Standards Authority

The billboard was located in Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington and received 11 complaints from people concerned the message was portraying dangerous and false information.

"The billboard showing the child presents information that I believe to be factually inaccurate. Masks have been shown worldwide to be safe and effective, including for children," one complainant said.

"I am particularly concerned that these billboards are erected outside of work and income New Zealand/Oranga Tamariki. These are agencies to which members of extremely vulnerable populations are likely to attend in person in order to see these boards."

The ASA said while it acknowledged the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 protection of freedom of expression, the public health implications of the pandemic justified a higher-level approach. The authority agreed the advertisement could discourage consumers, especially children, from wearing masks.

Similarly, another billboard about the COVID vaccine for children was told not to be used again after it alleged a child was harmed by the vaccine, without evidence to back the claim.

The billboard showed a child in hospital with the text stating "Maddie de Garay/12 years old/Pfizer trial participant/Injured 2021" and "COVID VAX FOR KIDS: THE RISKS ARE REAL".

Two people complained about the advertisement and the ASA upheld the complaints after finding there wasn't sufficient evidence that Maddie de Garay was harmed by the vaccine and the billboard presented "selective, unsubstantiated information likely to cause fear".

A third billboard about the COVID vaccine was upheld in part and settled in part after a person complained it was misleading.

The advertisement provided a link to CARM, a database that provides information on adverse reactions to medicines and vaccines.

"Have you reported your vaccine to CARM," the billboard stated.



Photo credit: Advertising Standards Authority

The ASA found the ad misleading because it did not provide the Voice For Freedom logo or website and may lead people to think the two groups were affiliated.

All three billboards were ordered not to be used again.

However, complaints about a billboard that caused concern in February over the use of an [image of a Dunedin man](#) who died from the vaccine were not upheld, meaning no further action was taken.

Rory Nairn died in November last year, less than two weeks after receiving his first dose of the Pfizer vaccine.

The billboard shows Nairn holding a dog with the text stating "Rory Nairn/26 years old/Died: 17th Nov 2021/Myocarditis after/Pfizer jab" and "COVID VAX: THE RISKS ARE REAL".

The ASA found the advertisement reflected information reported in a statement from the Ministry of Health and did not reach the threshold to breach the social responsibility or misleading principles of the Advertising Standards Code.

It found the likely takeout from the ad is that myocarditis is a risk from the vaccine, which is a known adverse reaction to vaccines.

Health experts say the risks of myocarditis after COVID vaccination is very rare.

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