

**HISTORY OF COMPLAINT  
CAS-7127647-R5S9G4  
BETWEEN TIM RICKMAN AND BBC**



*The Ukrainian government pays benefits to more than 36,000 widows of men who have died as a result of the Chernobyl disaster (Credit: Getty Images)*

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190725-will-we-ever-know-chernobyls-true-death-toll>

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**TR to BBC:**

Untrue caption to photo.

A photo on the BBC website page bears the caption "The Ukrainian government pays benefits to more than 36,000 widows of men who have died as a result of the Chernobyl disaster (Credit: Getty Images)". This is untrue. There have never been 36,000 widows of men who died as a result of the Chernobyl disaster.

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**BBC to TR:**

Dear Mr Rickman,

Thank you for contacting us about the BBC Future article 'The true toll of the Chernobyl disaster'.

We've noted your concerns, however, would also explain that later in the article we have linked to the source of the data in this sentence: 'Even now the Ukrainian government is paying benefits to 36,525 women who are considered to be widows of men who suffered as a result of the Chernobyl accident.'

This text links to a report which highlights that ‘Status of Widows of persons suffered from the ChNPP accident have 36,525 women.’  
([http://radiationproblems.org.ua/23\\_2018/NRCRM\\_2018\\_Paper\\_32.pdf](http://radiationproblems.org.ua/23_2018/NRCRM_2018_Paper_32.pdf) - page 4 - The BBC is not responsible for the content of external sites)

We hope this helps to allay your concerns and many thanks once again for contacting us.

Kind regards,

Janine McMeekin  
BBC Complaints Team  
[www.bbc.co.uk/complaints](http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints)

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**TR to BBC:**

Untrue caption to photo.

Thank you for your response. As I originally stated, your caption is untrue (and it does not even match the text you have now provided in attempted justification, let alone any credible source).

The human health effects of the Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster have been studied in detail and firm conclusions have now been published by expert UN agencies, notably UNSCEAR. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOvHxX5wMa8> at 51:30 summarises these in a single slide. The UNSCEAR report itself is available in full at [https://www.unscear.org/docs/reports/2008/11-80076\\_Report\\_2008\\_Annex\\_D.pdf](https://www.unscear.org/docs/reports/2008/11-80076_Report_2008_Annex_D.pdf) and is free.

Since the BBC Future article is variously misleading and untrue, it should be deleted from your website.

Please respond to this communication. This complaint has not yet been sent to any authority outside the BBC.

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**BBC to TR:**

Dear Mr Rickman,

Thank you for getting back in touch regarding your complaint.

We raised your further concerns with the BBC Future team who advised that the article makes reference to a wide variety of sources, including a number of official UN and IAEA reports. It also portrays the wide range of estimates for the deaths and health effects related to Chernobyl. These include those given the status and social protection of citizens suffering from the Chernobyl catastrophe under Ukrainian law, which is maintained in a National Registry by the Ukrainian government.

We are satisfied that the statements made in the story are accurate.

Many thanks once again for contacting us.

Kind regards,

Janine McMeekin  
BBC Complaints Team  
[www.bbc.co.uk/complaints](http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints)

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**TR to BBC:**

Thank you for your response.

BBC Future appear to have been confused by [http://radiationproblems.org.ua/23\\_2018/NRCRM\\_2018\\_Paper\\_32.pdf](http://radiationproblems.org.ua/23_2018/NRCRM_2018_Paper_32.pdf) which states, as you have previously quoted, "Status of Widows of persons suffered from the ChNPP accident have 36,525 women." BBC Future seem to think this statement means the "persons" are now dead (which is correct) and that they were killed by the Chernobyl accident (which is incorrect, as evidenced by UNSCEAR's findings to the contrary and illustrated by the fact that the persons typically stayed alive for decades after the accident and eventually died of ordinary medical conditions at a similar age to other people with the same lifestyle).

BBC Future's statement that the Chernobyl accident killed those people is untrue.

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**BBC to TR:**

Dear Mr Rickman

Thank you for taking the time to contact us again.

We're sorry to learn that you weren't satisfied with our earlier response. We've reviewed your complaint and the responses you've received and unfortunately, we have nothing further to add.

This concludes Stage 1 of our complaints process. That means we can't correspond with you further here. If you remain unhappy, you can now contact the BBC's Executive Complaints Unit (ECU). The ECU is Stage 2 of the BBC's complaints process. You'll need to explain why you think there's a potential breach of standards, or if the issue is significant and should still be investigated. Please do so within 20 working days of this reply.

Full details of how we handle complaints are available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/handle-complaint/>.

How to contact the ECU:

We've provided a unique link for you in this email. This will open up further information about how to submit your complaint. You'll be asked for the case reference number we've provided in this reply. Once you've used the link and submitted your complaint, the link will no longer work.

This is your link to contact the ECU if you wish:

[Click Here](#)

Kind regards

BBC Complaints Team  
[www.bbc.co.uk/complaints](http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints)

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**TR to BBC (ECU):**

The website bears the photo caption "The Ukrainian government pays benefits to more than 36,000 widows of men who have died as a result of the Chernobyl disaster". Repeated rigorous official reports by UN agencies (particularly UNSCEAR) state that this alleged death toll is not true (nor even anywhere near true) and that it never was true. These authoritative agencies also repeatedly and clearly state that they do not expect their death toll assessments to change significantly in future.

The untrue caption in the website apparently is based on [http://radiationproblems.org.ua/23\\_2018/NRCRM\\_2018\\_Paper\\_32.pdf](http://radiationproblems.org.ua/23_2018/NRCRM_2018_Paper_32.pdf) which states "Status of Widows of persons suffered from the ChNPP accident have 36,525 women." In fact, this statement may be true, because many people did suffer inconvenience, or suffered financially, or suffered psychological distress, or suffered in other ways, directly or indirectly as a result of the Chernobyl power plant disaster. Eventually, typically due to old age or health conditions not directly related to the disaster, they died. And now, if still surviving, their (mostly elderly) widows do indeed receive state financial support. Previous responses to my complaint appeared not to understand this.

The story very seriously misleads readers (who will all be making informal assessments of the comparative safety of low-carbon energy sources) and it needs to be removed entirely from the website.

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**BBC (ECU) to TR:**



British Broadcasting Corporation Broadcast Centre, BC2 B4, 201 Wood Lane, London, W12 7TP

Telephone: 020 8743 8000



Executive Complaints Unit

Mr T Rickman

Email: [timrick3@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:timrick3@yahoo.co.uk)

Ref: CAS-7127647

17 August 2022

Dear Mr Rickman

**"The true toll of the Chernobyl disaster", BBC Future Website**

Thank you for contacting the Executive Complaints Unit and asking it to investigate your complaint about an [article](#) on the BBC Future website.

In your initial correspondence you complained about the following caption to a photograph which you said was inaccurate and misleading:

*The Ukrainian government pays benefits to more than 36,000 widows of men who have died as a result of the Chernobyl disaster.*

In your subsequent complaint to this Unit you said "*Repeated rigorous official reports by UN agencies (particularly UNSCEAR) state that this alleged death toll is not true (nor even anywhere near true) and that it never was true*". You said the article should be removed because it "*very seriously misleads readers (who will all be making informal assessments of the comparative safety of low-carbon energy sources)*".

As you will be aware from previous complaints you have made to this Unit, the role of the Executive Complaints Unit is to assess the content of the article you complained about and decide whether it met the BBC's editorial standards for due accuracy. The standards are set out in full in the BBC's [Editorial Guidelines](#). Section Three which refers to the concept of "*due accuracy*" where the term "*due*" means "*adequate and appropriate to the output, taking account of the subject and nature of the content, the likely audience expectation and any signposting that may influence that expectation*".

My understanding is the long term effect of the Chernobyl disaster has prompted widespread debate within the scientific and medical community for many years. Numerous studies of varying types have been conducted and the conclusions of these studies have produced wildly different outcomes when assessing the number of people said to have been affected (or who might be affected in the future). Most reports appear to recognise the long-term health consequences of the accident remain uncertain.

This BBC article sought to analyse and assess the available evidence and set out the views of a range of informed and interested experts. It reflected the uncertainty which appears to exist, based on named sources and reports, and so I find it difficult to agree with your assertion readers would have been seriously misled by the photo caption you mentioned, or by the subsequent reference in the article which said *“Even now the Ukrainian government is paying benefits to [36,525 women who are considered to be widows](#) of men who suffered as a result of the Chernobyl accident”*. The script line clearly indicated the women receiving the benefit were *“considered”* by the Ukrainian government to have lost their partners because of the effects of the incident at Chernobyl. That is rather less definitive than saying more than 36,000 people are known to have died as a result of what happened.

The photo caption and the sentence I have transcribed above also have to be judged in the wider context of the additional information provided in the article. As you will be aware it included references to various studies about the number of deaths or health issues which have been linked to the Chernobyl incident and contained appropriately attributed, informed opinion. Readers would have been in no doubt there is an ongoing debate. I note, for example, the article contained the following caveats and information:

- The first photo caption said *“The number of deaths and illnesses caused by the radiation emitted from Chernobyl after the accident remains a contentious subject”*.
- The article said: *“According to the official, internationally recognised death toll, just [31 people died as an immediate result of Chernobyl](#) while the UN estimates that only 50 deaths can be directly attributed to the disaster. In 2005, it predicted a further [4,000 might eventually die as a result of the radiation exposure](#)”*. The article provided links to an FAQ published by the International Atomic Energy Agency and a news release published by the United Nations in September 2005.
- A further photo caption reaffirmed this: *“Thirty one engineers, firemen and emergency clean-up workers are officially recognised as dying in the first three months after the explosion”*.
- The article quoted from (and provided a link to) what was described as a *“contentious report”* published by the Russian Academy of Sciences estimating the death toll of those involved in the Chernobyl clean up operation. This was immediately followed by a line which said *“Many of the figures in the report, however, [were disputed by scientists in the West](#), who questioned their scientific validity”*.
- The article quoted claims made by the National Academy of Medical Sciences of Ukraine about the death toll among clean-up workers. It followed this with a quote from the International Atomic Energy Agency stating health studies on those workers have *“failed to show any direct correlation between their radiation exposure”* and cancer or other disease.

All the information above was sufficient to ensure the audience understood the debate which still exists around the consequences of the Chernobyl incident and sufficient to



ensure due accuracy (and due impartiality), as set out in the BBC's Editorial Guidelines, was achieved. I cannot agree readers would have taken the figure for the number of women receiving benefits from the Ukrainian government as a definitive death toll or been misled in the way you have claimed.

I appreciate you are unlikely to agree with my decision but I hope I have been able to explain the reasons why I am not upholding your complaint. There is no further right of appeal against this decision within the BBC's complaints process. In most cases, you could ask the broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, to consider your complaint but the regulator does not have any role in overseeing content produced by [BBC World Service](#). The BBC Future page is published by bbc.com, the commercial news website run by BBC World Service and so does not fall under Ofcom's [procedures](#) for handling complaints about BBC online material.

Yours sincerely



**Colin Tregear**  
Complaints Director

***ECU letter page 2 links:***

[http://radiationproblems.org.ua/23\\_2018/NRCRM\\_2018\\_Paper\\_32.pdf](http://radiationproblems.org.ua/23_2018/NRCRM_2018_Paper_32.pdf)

<https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/chernobyl/faqs>

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2005/dev2539.doc.htm>

<https://www.scribd.com/document/63975500/Correspondence-by-Ted-Rockwell-re-NYAS-and-Chernobyl-Book>

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**TR FINAL COMMENT:**

Based only on what the BBC has told us during the complaint process, the published article did not merely repeat an untrue allegation made by someone else - instead, it made up its own untrue statement and published that as fact. The BBC now has been informed of this and has declined to make any change.

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**CAS-7127647-R5S9G4 ENDS**