

## Reporting suicide

**THE REPORTING** of suicide – which had been covered within the Intrusion into Grief or Shock rules – became a freestanding clause in its own right in 2016.

This was an acknowledgment of the risks of simulative acts, advanced by organisations dedicated to preventing suicide. The new clause stresses the need to take care to avoid excessive detail of the method used, which might prompt or encourage copycat cases. At the same time, it strikes a balance by protecting the media’s right to report legal proceedings, such as inquests.

The “excessive detail rule”, which codified a practice already followed by many editors, was first introduced in 2006. It meant, for example, that while it might be perfectly proper to report that death was caused by an overdose of a type of tablet, it would probably be excessive to state the number of tablets used. Exceptions could be made if editors could demonstrate that publication was in the public interest.

As the aim is to avoid copycat acts, the rule would – under the spirit of the Code – apply to reporting attempted suicide and to any article appearing to romanticise or glamorise suicide, or which suggests a method is quick, easy or painless.

A novel method of suicide that has not been seen before

### WHAT THE CODE SAYS

When reporting suicide, to prevent simulative acts care should be taken to avoid excessive detail of the method used, while taking into account the media’s right to report legal proceedings.

*A public interest exemption may be available. [Click here.](#)*

and which might inspire simulative acts requires careful reporting, and there is evidence that the Press has willingly cooperated in restricting the level of detail in such cases, while still fulfilling the requirement to report important stories.

The suicide of a celebrity, while newsworthy, also requires vigilance on the part of editors.

Press coverage of suicide clusters in a specific geographic location was highlighted when more than 20 young people took their lives in and around Bridgend. Some parents, politicians and police blamed media coverage for possibly triggering later cases. Faced with such a story, editors must balance the public’s right to know with the need not to exacerbate the situation.

In Bridgend there were also concerns about the cumulative effect of media inquiries on bereaved families. Intrusion into Grief or Shock is now a standalone clause in the Code and must be taken into account when reporting suicide. Taking the two clauses together, editors face a twin test: they must publish with sensitivity and avoid excessive detail.

Some readers may find reports of suicide distressing. Editors might choose to include contact details or links to sources of support, such as Samaritans.

Samaritans has also produced guidance for reporting suicide, which is not binding but can be helpful for journalists. It is found here: [www.samaritans.org/media-centre/media-guidelines-reporting-suicide/supplementary-factsheets](http://www.samaritans.org/media-centre/media-guidelines-reporting-suicide/supplementary-factsheets).

The regulator has accepted complaints from third parties, as well as from close families or friends.

## Reporting inquests

While requiring editors to take care to avoid excessive detail, the new clause protects the media's right to report legal proceedings by adding "...while taking into account the media's right to report legal proceedings".

This applies particularly to inquests, where details are given in evidence and often need to be reported to provide a clear and accurate account of issues that are very much in the public interest. This means editors must strike a fine balance in their coverage. In addition to guarding against excessive detail that might result in a simulative act, editors must also exercise judgment to avoid including gratuitous detail that might intrude on grief.

A reporter's natural instinct is to give a full account of proceedings but Clause 5 requires great care in selecting what to include in a story and in deciding what level of detail is excessive. The PCC made this clear when it stated that newspapers were entitled to report on proceedings such

as inquests but the Code's requirements went further than those demanded by the law. It ruled that newspaper reports of an inquest into the death of a teacher who had electrocuted himself contained too much detail about the method.

"Inquests are held in public and newspapers are free to report their proceedings," said the PCC, "but to abide by the terms of the Code – which sets out standards over and above the legal framework – the papers should on this occasion have been less specific about the method used."

*A woman v Wigan Evening Post: [www.pcc.org.uk/cases/adjudicated.html?article=NDc1Mw](http://www.pcc.org.uk/cases/adjudicated.html?article=NDc1Mw)*

A family complained that "graphic and excessive detail" in a report of an inquest into the death of a scientist who had taken his life was an intrusion into the family's grief and could encourage simulative acts of suicide.

IPSO said that inquests are public hearings and newspapers play an important role in informing readers about evidence heard during proceedings, which is expressly recognised within the Code. However, IPSO made clear that the publication of gratuitous detail could constitute an intrusion into grief and therefore breach Clause 4.

In this case the details heard at the inquest had been presented in a factual and non-sensational way. In addition, there was a justification for the inclusion of the details in the article, which explained why some evidence appeared to raise a question about whether a third party had been involved in the man's death. There was no breach of Clauses 4 or 5.

*Smyth v Oxford Mail: [www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=14070-16](http://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=14070-16)*

Sometimes the story requires more detail to fulfil the requirement of effectively reporting inquest proceedings. A newspaper was accused of including excessive detail when it reported the position of a shotgun in a man's death.

IPSO did not uphold the complaint. It said the detail was expressly cited by the coroner as key to her conclusion that it had been an intentional act, despite the family's disagreement.

The inclusion of this information served an important purpose in explaining why the coroner had come to this decision. Indeed, the coroner had stated that because of the placement of the gun, she "[could] not see an alternative explanation". It was not, therefore, excessive.

*Hartley v Lancaster Guardian: [www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=01983-14](http://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=01983-14)*

Even consent from a relative would not necessarily absolve editors from responsibility under the "excessive detail" rule. The PCC accepted a third-party complaint that a magazine article contained too much detail, even though it was by the sister of a man who had taken his own life. The case was resolved without going to adjudication.

*Brown v She magazine: [www.pcc.org.uk/cases/adjudicated.html?article=NTE1OQ](http://www.pcc.org.uk/cases/adjudicated.html?article=NTE1OQ)*

IPSO has published guidelines on reporting deaths and inquests, which can be found here: [www.ipso.co.uk/press-standards/guidance-for-journalists-and-editors/deaths-and-inquests-guidance/](http://www.ipso.co.uk/press-standards/guidance-for-journalists-and-editors/deaths-and-inquests-guidance/)

## Trivialising or glamorising suicide

When the Daily Sport published a list of Britain's most popular suicide "hotspots", headlined "The Top Yourself 10", the PCC ruled that it had breached the rules on excessive detail. A Scottish NHS official complained that vulnerable people might be encouraged to visit the places shown and take their own lives.

The newspaper claimed the article was fair, balanced and based on information already in the public domain. But the PCC said that, while articles investigating the pattern of suicides are usually acceptable, this "entirely gratuitous" guide stated explicitly a number of options about how and where to attempt suicide. It was clearly excessive in the context.

Also, the light-hearted presentation of the piece could have glamorised suicide for some people, thus further breaching the Code, which is designed to minimise the risk of imitative acts.

*Choose Life v Daily Sport: [www.pcc.org.uk/cases/adjudicated.html?article=NTIOMA](http://www.pcc.org.uk/cases/adjudicated.html?article=NTIOMA)*