

A woman v Wigan Observer

Clauses noted: 5

A woman complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article, published in the Wigan Observer on 29th May headlined "Teacher found electrocuted" contained excessive detail about a death by suicide in breach of Clause 5 (Intrusion into grief or shock) of the Code.

The complaint was upheld.

The article reported an inquest into the suicide of the complainant's husband, who was a local teacher. She was concerned that the report contained the details of how he had electrocuted himself. She considered that this was particularly irresponsible, and that children taught by her husband might be adversely affected by such reporting.

The newspaper said that the article was an accurate report of the inquest. However, it accepted that too much detail may have been included about the method of death and apologised sincerely for causing the complainant distress.

The complainant wished for the Commission to adjudicate her complaint, in order to prevent repetition in similar cases.

Adjudication

Clause 5 of the Code was amended in 2006 to state that "when reporting suicide, care should be taken to avoid excessive detail about the method used". Complaints under this part of the Code are rare: this was the first matter to be adjudicated under the new clause, which was introduced to minimise the risk of copycat suicides.

The Commission agreed with the complainant that the newspapers had included too much detail in describing how the suicide happened. Inquests are held in public and newspapers are free to report their proceedings, 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. By going into such detail, there was a danger that sufficient information was included to spell out to others how to carry out such a suicide. The breach of the Code in this case was an opportunity for the Commission to underline to all editors the importance of taking care over the reporting of suicide. The complaint was upheld.

Adjudication issued 20/09/2007