

Ms Rosie Nicol-Harper v Southern Daily Echo

Clauses noted: 5

Ms Rosie Nicol-Harper complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article headlined 'Man used balloon kit to take his own life', published in the Southern Daily Echo on 12 July 2010, contained excessive detail about a method of suicide in breach of Clause 5 (ii) (Intrusion into grief or shock) of the Editors' Code of Practice.

The complaint was not upheld.

The article reported an inquest hearing into the death of a man who had taken his own life by inhaling helium. The piece noted that the man had bought a 'blow up balloon kit', which included 'helium canisters', and had died after 'inhaling too much' of the gas. The complainant said that this method of suicide was uncommon and that, by revealing such excessive detail, the newspaper was likely to encourage copycat suicides.

The newspaper said it was aware of the Code's requirements on reporting suicide and had sought to remove detail about the method used in this case, in order to limit the chance of others copying it. For instance, it had not reported how precisely the gas had been inhaled, or the quantity that would generally lead to death. In the context of a straightforward inquest report, the newspaper argued that it would have been improper and misleading not to have revealed the basic means by which the man had died.

Adjudication

The Commission has made several rulings under Clause 5 (ii) of the Editors' Code, which was introduced in 2006 specifically to deal with concerns about copycat suicides. The key part of this Clause relates to care being taken to prevent the publication of "excessive detail" about suicide methods.

In this case, even though it was a fairly uncommon method of suicide, the Commission did not consider that the newspaper had breached the terms of the Code. The newspaper was entitled to cover the inquest proceedings and to report the basic details of the method. Details about the precise apparatus that had been constructed - and how much gas had been inhaled - might well have been excessive in breach of the Code, but they had not been included. This was a difficult balancing act, but the Commission was satisfied that the newspaper had published a suitably limited level of detail.

As a result, while the Commission wishes newspapers to remain vigilant in this area, it did not uphold the complaint.

Adjudication issued 30/09/2010