

Thames Valley Police v Metro

Clauses noted: 11

Thames Valley Police complained on behalf of an unnamed victim of sexual assault that an article headlined 'Rapist cuts off cancer woman's hair' published in The London Metro on 27 May 2002 contained details that were likely to identify her or contribute to her identification in breach of Clause 12 (Victims of sexual assault).

The complaint was upheld.

The article reported that a young woman had been raped. It named the town in which the attack took place and contained details about the nature of the assault. It also contained information about the victim, such as her age and recent health problems and details of 'the family home' where the attack happened. The police representative claimed that the article contained excessive detail and was likely to contribute to the identification of the victim.

The newspaper pointed out that it had not named the specific residential area where the assault took place and indeed, it was not clear from the story whether the victim actually lived in that same area or even in the same town.

Adjudication

For a number of reasons - not least the extreme vulnerability of victims of such appalling crimes - Clause 12 of the Code places very onerous burdens on editors. Not only does the Code prohibit identification, it also prohibits the publication of information likely to contribute to such identification. There is no defence of public interest to this part of the Code as it is crucial that its rigorous terms are followed to the letter by all editors.

In this case, the Commission noted that the article had not identified the victim of assault by name or address. However, it was the Commission's view that sufficient information was contained in the report to contribute to potential identification and the Code had therefore been breached.

In upholding this complaint, the Commission wished to underline the extreme importance it attaches to the scrupulous manner in which reports about sex crimes should be constructed. Any details beyond the most basic - no matter how small - can identify a victim to someone who does not know of the crime to which that person has been subjected. The purpose of the Code - breaches of which in this area are very rare thanks to the generally high standards of reporting - is to ensure that this cannot happen and that victims maintain the anonymity they deserve.

Adjudication issued 2002