

PCC investigation v Full House

Clauses noted: 15

The Press Complaints Commission has investigated an offer of payment by Full House magazine to a witness during the trial of Kate Knight, who was subsequently jailed for 30 years for poisoning her husband with anti-freeze.

It found a breach of Clause 15 (Witness payments in criminal trials) of the Code.

The PCC was informed that, during an overnight break in the testimony of a prosecution witness, a feature writer from the magazine approached the witness by letter, offering a fee for an interview once the trial had finished. While the witness had received other requests for an interview, this was the only letter that referred to payment. The witness brought the matter to the court's attention and there was no effect on the course of proceedings.

The editor told the Commission that the letter had been sent prematurely by the writer as a result of a misunderstanding. It had since reviewed its working practices to ensure that this would not be repeated. It accepted that it had fallen short of the high standards that are required in this area.

Adjudication

While the Commission welcomed the fact that the editor had immediately accepted that the magazine had been wrong to approach the witness in this way, this was a serious matter for which it was right to censure the magazine.

The terms of Clause 15 are absolutely clear: there should be no offer of payment to a witness while proceedings are active. This is to prevent payments having any real or perceived influence on the administration of justice.

On this occasion, there was fortunately no evidence that the trial had been affected by the offer. But it is never acceptable for witnesses to be approached with offers of payment while they are giving evidence, and the journalist's actions could have had extremely serious consequences. It was therefore right for the magazine to take steps to ensure that this transgression is not repeated. The Commission has asked the magazine to provide it with details of how it has changed its working practice.

Adjudication issued 23/04/2008