

SWT to OTWY

PRESS COMPLAINTS COMMISSION

From the Director

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I am writing from the Press Complaints Commission to let you know about a recent change to our Code of Practice that will be of relevance to your work in the area of inquests.

As you will know, the PCC primarily acts as a mediation service to help people who may have suffered from inaccurate or intrusive newspaper and magazine reporting, or who feel that they are being harassed by journalists. We take formal complaints under the terms of the Code of Practice – an updated version of which I enclose with this letter – but we also give informal, practical advice over the telephone about how to deal with particular problems.

Until recently, reporting suicide was covered by the Code's general provisions on Intrusion into Grief or Shock (Clause 5), which requires the press to carry out inquiries with sympathy and discretion and to handle publication sensitively. However, as part of its annual Code review, the Committee considered international evidence highlighting the dangers of imitative deaths following reports of suicide. In light of that, the Committee, which writes and revises the voluntary Code to which the British press subscribes, felt that the risk of copycat suicides should be addressed specifically.

Clause 5 of the Code was therefore amended to include a new sub-clause, which reads as follows: **ii) When reporting suicide, care should be taken to avoid excessive detail about the method used.**

The PCC has also produced a guidance note for members of the public about how to make a complaint to us in times of grief or shock, a copy of which I also enclose with this letter. Analysis of our complaints shows that one of the main reasons that members of the public complain is that they are connected to someone who has suffered an unusual or premature death. Complaints about the reporting of inquests are common – either under the clause that relates to intrusion into grief and shock or over a matter of

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accuracy. Many complainants do not realise that the press generally has the right to report details that emerge during inquest, but there is nonetheless often something that we can do to help them.

I should also point out that the PCC is able to respond immediately to concerns about the physical behaviour of journalists, which may be particularly distressing at times of grief. We can be contacted on a 24-hour basis, and send messages across the industry asking journalists to desist from contacting family members, if they wish us to do so. I attach some copies of a leaflet we produce on this, which you might wish to make available to those attending inquests.

It may help some families to be generally aware of the PCC at the time of the inquest. If you would like more information about the PCC then please do let me know. My e-mail address is tim.toulmin@pcc.org.uk. Our website - www.pcc.org.uk - might also be of interest.

With kind regards.

Yours sincerely


Tim Toulmin

