



From the Director

Anne Parry
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17 September 2008

Dear Anne,

Thank you for your letter of September 12th.

There are a number of developments at the moment. We are discussing with the Code Committee about the best way of producing some sort of guidance that might complement what the Code says. Ian Beales has confirmed that his point was that any guidance would need to factor in the PCC's own experience – not that it would solely be for the PCC.

The public event to discuss the reporting of suicide will take place on the evening of 1st December at the London School of Economics. Our Communications Officer, Catherine Speller, will keep you informed of details.

Thank you for your kind offer to provide the Commission with expert advice in the event that it needs to adjudicate again on the question of excessive detail. We will bear this in mind and may revert to you should the need arise. You may have seen that we have just upheld another complaint on this point. I am enclosing a copy for your information.

With kind regards.

Tim
Toulmin

Tim Toulmin

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COMPLAINANT NAME:

Adjudicated - Choose Life v Daily Sport

CLAUSES NOTED: 5

PUBLICATION: Daily Sport

COMPLAINT:

Mr Dougie Paterson of Choose Life, NHS Health Scotland, complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article headlined "The top yourself 10" published in the Daily Sport on 30 May 2008 contained excessive detail about the methods used in suicide in breach of Clause 5 (Intrusion into grief or shock) of the Code of Practice.

The complaint was upheld.

The article was a list – following the British Transport Police's release of information that a stretch of railway line had claimed 25 lives in 3 years – of the 10 most popular "suicide hotspots" in the United Kingdom. The complainant said that the newspaper had provided unnecessary detail which might encourage vulnerable people to visit the places shown and take their own lives. As such, the article was highly irresponsible.

The newspaper said that it was fully aware of the seriousness and sensitivity surrounding mental health issues. It considered that the article was a fair and balanced factual report in the public interest, based on information in the public domain.

DECISION:

Upheld

ADJUDICATION:

Clause 5 (ii) of the Code states that "when reporting suicide, care should be taken to avoid excessive detail about the method used". The purpose of this Clause is to prevent the publication of unnecessary information which might encourage 'copycat' suicides.

The Commission firstly made clear that references to the whereabouts of individual suicides in the context of a newsworthy event – such as an inquest report – are generally acceptable under the Code. Additionally, the Code does not seek to prevent a newspaper reporting on the general subject of suicide, or investigating a pattern of suicides, in a manner that serves the public interest.

The problem with this case was that it was an entirely gratuitous guide to where individuals have killed themselves, and explicitly pointed out to people that there were a number of options about how and where to attempt suicide. This was clearly excessive in the context. The Commission was also concerned that the light-hearted presentation of the piece – which referred, for instance, to one bridge as being a "well-known favourite for Britain's top-yourself tourists" – may have glamorised suicide in the eyes of some readers. As the Code is designed to minimise the chances of imitative suicides, this was a further breach of the Code.

REPORT:

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