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Leveson Inquiry: Culture, Practice and Ethics of the Press

Submission by Samaritans – November 2011

Samaritans is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on issues relating to the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practice and ethics of the press.

This submission aims to provide the Inquiry with information relating to:

- media reporting of suicide;
- the strong evidence that certain types of reporting can have a negative influence on people who are already vulnerable, thereby putting them at greater risk of suicide;
- the work that Samaritans has carried out, in partnership with the Press Complaints Commission and others, to promote responsible reporting of suicide in the press.

We believe that these issues are relevant to Part 1 of the Terms of Reference of the Leveson Inquiry. In particular, these issues are relevant to the Inquiry's examination of the current press policy and regulatory framework and its remit to make recommendations *"for a new more effective policy and regulatory regime which supports the integrity and freedom of the press, the plurality of the media, and its independence, including from Government, while encouraging the highest ethical and professional standards"*.

This submission makes three recommendations for the future policy and regulatory regime:

1) Amendments to the Editors' Code of Practice – to revise clause 5(ii) of the Editors' Code of Practice to remove the word 'excessive' in relation to the level of detail of a suicide method reported, and to require newspapers to question whether any detail they include about the method of suicide is truly necessary to the reporting of a suicide.

2) Greater powers for the regulator – to give the regulator greater powers to prevent irresponsible coverage of suicide, specifically the power to rein in newspaper reporting in a limited number of cases where there is clear evidence that such reporting is likely to lead to further deaths.

3) A proactive role for the regulator – to include in the new regulatory regime's responsibilities a duty to monitor reporting of suicide, promote responsible reporting of suicide and support the press in delivering sensitive reporting of suicide to ensure that progress made in improving media reporting of suicide in recent years is maintained.

We believe that it is essential that appropriate media reporting of suicide is recognised as integral to ethical and professional standards in the press and that achieving responsible reporting of suicide is embedded in the regulator's role.

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Charity No. 219432

SAMARITANS

1. About Samaritans

- 1.1. Samaritans' vision is that fewer people die by suicide.
- 1.2. We work to achieve this vision by making it our mission to alleviate emotional distress and reduce the incidence of suicidal feelings and suicidal behaviour. We do this by:
 - being available 24 hours a day to provide support for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those which may lead to suicide;
 - reaching out to high risk groups and communities to reduce the risk of suicide;
 - working in partnership with other organisations, agencies and experts;
 - influencing public policy and raising awareness of the challenges of reducing suicide.
- 1.3. Samaritans is a registered charity.

2. Samaritans' interest in the Leveson Inquiry

- 2.1. Suicide is a major public health issue and a major cause of preventable death. More than 5,500 people die by suicide each year in the UK¹ and suicide is the second most common cause of death in men under the age of 35.²
- 2.2. It has been proven through extensive research that certain types of media reporting of suicide can have a negative influence on the behaviour of people who are already vulnerable and put them at greater risk of suicide.
- 2.3. Consequently, the need to promote responsible reporting and portrayal of suicide and suicidal behaviour in the media is a core part of the UK Government's suicide prevention policy in England, as well as the suicide prevention strategies of the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- 2.4. Over the past few years, Samaritans has built a productive working relationship with the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), and worked with a range of national, regional and local newspaper titles to promote and ensure responsible reporting of suicide.
- 2.5. We undertake daily monitoring of newspaper reporting of suicide, assessing around 2,500 articles relating to suicide each year. We contact newspaper staff and/or the PCC when concerns arise and suggest amendments that could be made to the online versions of the articles in question.
- 2.6. We have also published *Media Guidelines for reporting suicide and self-harm*, which provide information and advice for the media on how to report suicide and self-harm appropriately and sensitively. The first version of these guidelines was published in 1994 and there have been several updates since, most recently in 2008.³
- 2.7. The Department of Health's new cross-government outcomes strategy to prevent suicide in England, published in draft form earlier this year, states that: "*Samaritans plays a key role in*

¹ ONS statistical bulletin, *Suicide rates in the United Kingdom 2000-2009*, (January 2011) <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/subnational-health4/suicides-in-the-united-kingdom/2009/index.html>

² ONS *Mortality Statistics: Deaths registered in England and Wales 2010*
<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcn%3A77-230730>

³ *Media Guidelines for reporting suicide and self-harm*, 2008 http://www.samaritans.org/media_centre/media_guidelines.aspx

SAMARITANS

*monitoring media coverage of suicide, looking at examples of both poor and excessive reporting of suicide in the UK in national, regional and local media.*⁴

- 2.8. We believe that, through this work, considerable progress has been made in recent years in the way that suicide is reported in the press. We are keen to ensure that this progress is maintained under any new regulatory regime that may be established.
- 2.9. We therefore hope that the importance of this issue will be recognised as part of the Leveson Inquiry's examination of the culture, practice and ethics of the press and given consideration within its recommendations for a more effective press regulatory regime.
- 2.10. We believe it is essential that appropriate media reporting of suicide is recognised as integral to ethical and professional standards in the press and that achieving responsible reporting of suicide is embedded in the regulator's role.
- 2.11. In preparing this submission, Samaritans has consulted with some of the UK's leading experts on the influence of the media on suicidal behaviour, including Professor David Gunnell, Professor of Epidemiology at the University of Bristol; Professor Keith Hawton, Director of the Centre for Suicide Research at the University of Oxford; and Professor Stephen Platt, Professor of Health Policy Research at the University of Edinburgh.

3. Evidence of the impact of suicide reporting and the policy response

- 3.1. There is a substantial body of evidence which indicates that inappropriate reporting or depiction of suicide can influence suicidal behaviour and may result in an overall increase in suicide and an increase in the use of particular methods.
- 3.2. In its 2008 publication *Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals*, the World Health Organisation stated that: "*vulnerable individuals may be influenced to engage in imitative behaviours by reports of suicide, particularly if the coverage is extensive, prominent, sensationalist and/or explicitly describes the method of suicide.*"⁵
- 3.3. It notes that over 50 investigations into imitative or 'copycat' suicides have been conducted and that systematic reviews of these studies have consistently led to the conclusion that media reporting (both print and broadcast) of suicide can lead to imitative suicidal behaviours. These studies include:
 - Yip *et al* (2006) examined the press coverage of the suicide of Leslie Cheung, a Hong Kong singer and actor who jumped from a height on 1 April 2003. 1,243 articles about his death were identified in the following eight days and, on six of these eight days, there was at least one front-page newspaper report. It was subsequently found that there was a statistically significant increase in suicide following Cheung's death and also an increase in suicides by jumping from a height.⁶
 - Romer *et al* (2006) examined suicide news reporting for four months in 1993 in six United States cities, arguing that their study of the local impact of local news was more

⁴ *Consultation on preventing suicide in England: A cross-government outcomes strategy to save lives*, Department of Health, July 2011, page 49

⁵ *Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals*, World Health Organisation (2008), page 5,

http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/resource_media.pdf

⁶ Yip *et al* (2006) *The effects of a celebrity suicide on suicide rates in Hong Kong*, *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 93(1-3): 245-52

SAMARITANS

precise than previous studies in the US about national news. They employed a sophisticated design, where they identified stories on television news in each of the cities and examined their association with suicide rates in these cities. The study found that local television reports of suicide were associated with increases in local suicide rates.⁷

- Lee *et al* (2002) studied the spread of suicide by ██████████ in Asia. A newspaper report in Hong Kong included a detailed description of a person who had died by suicide ██████████. Within three years there had been a dramatic increase in suicides by this method, with the proportion of suicide deaths in Hong Kong by this method rising from 0 per cent to 10 per cent.⁸
- Hawton *et al* (1999) studied the impact of an episode of a popular UK television drama containing a storyline about a deliberate self-poisoning ██████████. The researchers interviewed patients who attended accident and emergency departments and psychiatric services, and found that 20 per cent said the programme had influenced their decision to take an overdose. Self-poisoning increased by 17 per cent in the week following the broadcast and by 9 per cent in the second week.⁹
- Ashton and Donnan (1981) looked at an epidemic of 82 suicides ██████████ in the UK from October 1978 to October 1979 that followed a widely-publicised political suicide using the same method. However, unlike the original widely-publicised suicide, none of the 82 suicides that followed appeared to have been carried out for political reasons and at least 64 of those who died had a previous history of mental health problems. The study found that *“there can be little doubt that the spread of this specific epidemic must have been mediated by news coverage”*.¹⁰

3.4. In response to this evidence, the promotion of responsible media reporting of suicide is now a core element of government-backed national suicide prevention strategies in several countries, including Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and also further afield, including Australia and New Zealand.

3.5. In England, the Department of Health's new cross-government outcomes strategy to prevent suicide, published in draft form earlier this year, defines six 'Areas for Action', one of which is to *“support the media in delivering sensible and sensitive approaches to suicide and suicidal behaviour”*.¹¹ The draft strategy notes that: *“the media have a significant influence on behaviour and attitudes. There is already compelling evidence that media reporting and portrayals of suicide can lead to copycat behaviour, especially among young people and those already at risk”*.¹²

3.6. In 2006, a new sub-clause 5(ii) was inserted into the Editors' Code of Practice following the submission of evidence by Samaritans and other groups to the Code Committee. The current clause 5 (Intrusion into grief or shock) of the Editors' Code of Practice¹³ now reads:

⁷ Romer D, Jamieson P. E. & Jamieson K. H. (2006). *Are news reports of suicide contagious? A stringent test in six U.S. cities*, Journal of Communication 56, 253-70

⁸ Lee D, Chan K, Lee S & Yip PSF (2002) *Burning Charcoal: A novel and contagious method of suicide in Asia*, Archives of General Psychiatry, 59, 293-4

⁹ Hawton K, Simkin S, Deeks J.J et al (1999) *Effects of a drug overdose in a television drama on presentations to hospital for self-poisoning: time series and questionnaire study*, BMJ 318, 972-77

¹⁰ Ashton J, Donnan S (1981) *Suicide by burning as an epidemic phenomenon: an analysis of 82 deaths and inquests in England and Wales in 1978-79*, Psychological Medicine 11, 735-39

¹¹ *Consultation on preventing suicide in England: A cross-government outcomes strategy to save lives*, Department of Health, July 2011, page 48

¹² *Consultation on preventing suicide in England: A cross-government outcomes strategy to save lives*, Department of Health, July 2011, page 48

¹³ Editors' Code of Practice, <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html>

SAMARITANS

i) In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion and publication handled sensitively. This should not restrict the right to report legal proceedings, such as inquests.

ii) When reporting suicide, care should be taken to avoid excessive detail about the method used.

- 3.7. The Editors' Codebook, which accompanies the Code of Practice, provides more detailed guidance on this issue. It notes that suicide is covered by the Code's rules on intrusion into grief but that, in addition to this, media portrayals of suicide "*can influence suicidal behaviour and lead to multiple imitative acts, particularly among the young*".¹⁴ This means that editors "*face a twin test: they must both publish with sensitivity and avoid excessive detail*".¹⁵

4. Case Study 1 – Events in Bridgend: 2007/08

- 4.1. Over a period of 18 months across 2007 and 2008, there was a series of more than 20 suicides involving young people in the Welsh county of Bridgend, attracting widespread national media attention. Newspaper and broadcast coverage of these events exposed considerable problems with the way that the press handles the reporting of high-profile suicide cases. There were clear examples of sensationalist reporting, intrusion into the privacy of bereaved families and the publication of details about the suicide methods used. Some coverage focused on unfounded speculation about an "internet cult" or "death cult" causing the deaths, accompanied by sensationalist front-page headlines.
- 4.2. In early 2008, some of the bereaved relatives, the local police and the local Member of Parliament, Madeleine Moon, expressed concern that the extensive media coverage of the Bridgend suicides could be influencing other vulnerable young people, making them more likely to attempt to take their own lives. Several bereaved relatives also objected to the high-profile and intrusive nature of the media coverage and stated that it had caused them further distress, particularly through the prominent publication and continuous re-publication of photographs of their deceased loved ones in national and local newspapers.^{16 17} In addition, Madeleine Moon MP consulted with several of the bereaved families and consequently communicated to various news outlets via the PCC's advisory notice system their wish not to be contacted any further by the media.
- 4.3. The fear that media reporting had exacerbated events in Bridgend prompted fresh activity from the PCC over the issue of suicide reporting, including:
- a visit to Bridgend in May 2008 by representatives of the PCC, including the then Chair Sir Christopher Meyer, to meet bereaved families and community leaders and hear about their experiences;
 - a revision to the Editors' Codebook to emphasise the lessons that should be learned from the Bridgend experience, including the need to avoid glorifying or romanticising suicide, publishing graphic images or excessive detail about suicide methods,

¹⁴ Beales I, *The Editors' Codebook*, Editors' Code of Practice Committee, page 51
<http://www.editorscode.org.uk/downloads/codebook/codebook.pdf>

¹⁵ Beales I, *The Editors' Codebook*, Editors' Code of Practice Committee, page 51
<http://www.editorscode.org.uk/downloads/codebook/codebook.pdf>

¹⁶ *Parents Attack Suicides Coverage*, 19th February 2008, BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7253788.stm>

¹⁷ Oral evidence to Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee inquiry on Press Standards, Privacy and Libel (2010) page Ev88, Q282, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcmds/362/362ii.pdf>

SAMARITANS

repeatedly contacting bereaved family members and re-publishing photographs of the deceased;

- involvement in seminars and conferences, together with organisations including Samaritans and the LSE/London College of Communication think-tank POLIS. The purpose of these was to engage with senior figures in the newspaper industry and provide a platform for discussion and debate on the complex issues that arose regarding suicide reporting in the context of Bridgend.

4.4. In 2009, the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee examined some of the issues relating to media coverage of the Bridgend suicides as part of its inquiry into Press Standards, Privacy and Libel. The committee looked at the complaints made to the PCC about the nature of some of the reporting and heard evidence from various witnesses, including the then Chair of the PCC, Sir Christopher Meyer, and the father of one of the young people who died by suicide in Bridgend.

4.5. The committee's final report, published in February 2010, concluded that: *"The PCC Code provides suitable guidance on suicide reporting, but in our view the PCC should be tougher in ensuring that journalists abide by it. The experience of Bridgend shows the damage that can be caused if irresponsible reporting is allowed to continue unchecked; the PCC needs to monitor the conduct of journalists and the standard of coverage in such cases."*¹⁸

5. Samaritans' proactive approach

5.1. Following the experience of Bridgend, Samaritans adopted a more proactive approach towards promoting responsible reporting of suicide in the press. This approach focuses on building relationships with newspaper titles, with the aim of advancing constructive dialogue and raising awareness of the impact that irresponsible, sensationalist or detailed reporting can have on vulnerable individuals, increasing the risk of death by suicide. Our proactive approach to working with the media involves several strands.

Monitoring suicide-related press coverage

5.2. Samaritans monitors suicide-related press coverage on a daily basis, as it is important that concerns relating to published articles are raised quickly with the relevant newspaper, to ensure that online versions of the article and future reporting by that newspaper comply with clause 5 of the Editors' Code of Practice. Over the past year, we have assessed around 2,500 articles.

5.3. We make a record of each article we review, and assess whether it breaches clause 5(ii) or Samaritans' *Media Guidelines*. A decision is then made as to whether to take no action, to contact the relevant newspaper or to make a complaint to the PCC. The most common outcome is to take no action or to contact the newspaper with our concerns.

5.4. We work collaboratively with the press to ensure that the level of detail about the suicide method in an article or subsequent reporting is reduced without unduly affecting the freedom of the press. Most newspapers are receptive to our approaches and, after considering our suggestions for how to reduce the level of detail about the suicide method given in an article, are usually willing to amend the online version of the article in question.

¹⁸ Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee report on Press Standards, Privacy and Libel (2010) page 95, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcmums/362/362i.pdf>

SAMARITANS

- 5.5. We rarely take the route of making formal complaints to the PCC and, when we do, we often reach an agreement with the newspaper before it goes to the Code Committee. In 2011 thus far, we have lodged two complaints with the PCC – one against the Wrexham Evening Leader¹⁹ and the other against the Liverpool Daily Post.²⁰ Both papers agreed that the level of detail in their reporting may have been high and we resolved the complaint before it progressed to the Code Committee.
- 5.6. The reasons we do not make formal complaints to the PCC frequently are twofold:
- Firstly, we have found that journalists and editors appreciate the cooperative and constructive approach that we take, given the complexity of the issues involved. We have come to believe that a confrontational approach is best avoided.
 - Secondly, at the present time, the bar for complaints to be successfully upheld under clause 5(ii) is set at a high level and usually takes place only where detail of highly complicated or unusual methods of suicide is published. We are concerned that, if we make a complaint regarding the inclusion of detail about a suicide method that is not complicated (but nonetheless potentially dangerous to report) and it were not upheld, this would risk setting a precedent that would allow for that level of detail to be routinely reported in future.

Influencing the reporting of high-profile suicide cases

- 5.7. Samaritans issues confidential briefings to a wide range of media outlets, providing guidance on the level of acceptable reporting, as soon as we are aware of a suicide that we believe will attract significant press coverage. This is usually where a suicide involves the death of a well-known public figure or because it involves a factor that is newsworthy – such as a suicide pact, a cluster of suicides in the same geographical area, or a method that is unusual or new to this country. These briefings do produce changes in the tone and content of some coverage.
- 5.8. These briefings were initiated in late 2009, and the content has been refined following feedback from media outlets. The need to issue briefings is relatively infrequent; such briefings have been issued a dozen times over the past two years. Our briefings to date are included with this submission.

Intervening to avert suicide clusters

- 5.9. In cases where there is a risk of a cluster of suicides forming in a particular location, Samaritans alerts local media outlets to the situation and requests them to refrain from reporting the method of suicide in great detail and from linking the suicides together. We are conscious that there is a risk that, in alerting the media to a situation of which they may have been previously unaware, coverage may increase. However, on balance, we take the view that active intervention is more likely to prevent inappropriate coverage.
- 5.10. Such an intervention was made in relation to the case of three suicides of teenagers in the St Albans area, which occurred close together in mid-2009. The newspapers involved were

¹⁹ Resolution to complaint against Wrexham Evening Leader, PCC (26th May 2011)
<http://www.pcc.org.uk/news/index.html?article=NzE1OA>

²⁰ Resolution to complaint against Liverpool Daily Post, PCC (11th May 2011)
<http://www.pcc.org.uk/news/index.html?article=NzEzNw>

SAMARITANS

receptive to our approach and restrained in their reporting. We are not aware that any suicides have occurred since the initial three that could be construed as imitative.

- 5.11. Samaritans worked with Choose Life, the national suicide prevention programme in Scotland, when around eight suicides occurred in Dundee in two months in the summer of 2010. Choose Life led on briefing the Scottish media, while Samaritans monitored the rest of the UK media. Very little coverage reached the media outside of Scotland, and the cluster seems to have been contained.

Advice and briefings to the press

- 5.12. Samaritans is available 24/7 to offer advice to journalists on how to report a suicide-related story appropriately. This service is used by various newspapers, including national titles, on a regular basis.
- 5.13. We offer individual and group briefings to newspaper staff, and to other media. Over the past year, a number of these sessions have been held across the UK, some of which have been co-hosted with the PCC.

6. Case Study 2 – ‘[REDACTED] suicide’ pacts in Braintree, Putney and Buckinghamshire: 2010/11

- 6.1. A significant concern relating to press coverage of suicide is the reporting of methods that are not widely known, but where access to the means of carrying them out is freely available. The reporting of a suicide method involving the use of [REDACTED] is a recent example of this. There was considerable concern that [REDACTED] copycat suicides would follow.
- 6.2. The [REDACTED] method has spread elsewhere in the world, most notably in Japan, where there were as many as 220 such attempted suicides between March and June 2008, resulting in 208 deaths. This followed the widespread transmission of information about the method in the media and on the internet.²¹
- 6.3. On 20 September 2010, a case occurred in the UK which involved two people who had formed a suicide pact online, and used the [REDACTED] method to end their lives in Braintree, Essex. This attracted front-page national press coverage and was referred to as a [REDACTED]. To Samaritans' knowledge, this was the first time this method of suicide had been used in carrying out a suicide pact in this country.
- 6.4. Our immediate concern was the possible spread of similar incidents following the widespread publication of information about this method. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] We therefore issued a briefing (marked Briefing 1 and included with this submission) to all news outlets advising them to take care in their reporting of this case.
- 6.5. On 30 September 2010, an apparent copycat pact occurred in Putney, using the same method. The subsequent inquest has shown that the two people involved also met online

²¹ Morii D, Miyagatani Y, Nakamae N, Murao M & Taniyama K, *Japanese experience of [REDACTED]: the suicide craze in 2008*, Journal of Occupational Medicine and Toxicology (2010)

SAMARITANS

days before their deaths. We issued another media briefing (marked Briefing 2 and included with this submission) on 30 September and a public statement²² to news outlets, again communicating our concerns. This was picked up by The Guardian, which published an article regarding this issue on 1 October 2010.²³

- 6.6. Between 21 and 30 September 2010, our monitoring recorded 26 printed articles in national newspapers reporting on the first suicide pact in Braintree, Essex, as well as widespread online and local coverage. In national newspapers during this period, three articles carried details of the suicide on the front page of the newspaper and 10 articles appeared no later than page 15. Seven articles mentioned the term [REDACTED].
- 6.7. Between 1 and 4 October 2010, our monitoring recorded 21 national newspaper print articles about the second pact in Putney, as well as widespread online and local coverage. In national newspapers during this period, two articles carried details on the front page and 12 articles appeared no later than page 15. Nine out of 10 of the initial stories (on 1 October) about the second pact made a direct link to the Essex pact. In total, only three recorded articles during the period did not link the second pact directly to the first. Nine articles mentioned the term [REDACTED].
- 6.8. Conscious of the risk that further suicides involving the [REDACTED] method could be triggered by widespread media coverage, Samaritans requested the PCC to assist in convening a meeting involving all the national newspapers. This took place in January 2011, under Chatham House rules, and was attended by senior executives of the majority of national newspaper titles, along with experts in this area including Professor David Gunnell (Professor of Epidemiology at the University of Bristol) and Professor Stephen Platt (Professor of Health Policy Research at the University of Edinburgh and a Samaritans Trustee).
- 6.9. We believe that our appeal for collective restraint in the reporting of future [REDACTED] was accepted and acted upon by the newspaper groups represented at the meeting. Several newspapers asked for follow-up briefings for their executive teams.
- 6.10. On 22 February 2011, a third [REDACTED] pact occurred in Buckinghamshire. This pact was almost identical to the first – two strangers, a man and a woman, met online and died together in a car with a hazard note pasted on the window of the car. Writing online before her death, the woman said: *"I want to gas myself like those two people did in their car. I need to know what they used to make the lethal gas. Hope you can help."*
- 6.11. Between 28 February 2011, when the Buckinghamshire pact was first reported, and 2 March 2011, we recorded nine national newspaper print articles about this third pact, one of which was a front-page story. Six articles appeared no later than page 15, and four articles made a direct link to the other pacts. Only two mentioned the term [REDACTED]. Samaritans believes that the national newspapers responded positively to our request for restraint in January and that, as a result of this intervention, the press coverage of the third pact was much less prominent, relative to the first two pacts.
- 6.12. Recent research by Gunnell *et al.* (2011) shows substantial spikes in the number of online searches for the term [REDACTED] on Google in both Japan and the UK around the times when the first-known [REDACTED] received publicity in the respective

²² Samaritans statement, 1st October 2010, http://www.samaritans.org/media_centre/latest_press_releases/london_copycat.aspx

²³ Samaritans chief issues warning after suspected copycat suicides, 1st October 2010, The Guardian <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/oct/01/samaritans-warning-suicides?INTCMP=SRCH>

SAMARITANS

countries.²⁴ The data shows though that the number of searches for [REDACTED] increased relatively less in the UK than in Japan. In addition, the relative number of searches dropped much more quickly in the UK, at the time when active intervention on the part of Samaritans was occurring with the UK press.

- 6.13. Gunnell's paper does acknowledge that there may be cultural or other reasons why the number of [REDACTED] in Japan has been much higher than in the UK. However, he points out that, while in Japan there were more than 200 deaths in the four months after publicity of the initial deaths, in the UK there has only been one known pact (on 22 February 2011 in Buckinghamshire) following publicity of the initial two pacts.
- 6.14. There may possibly have been a very small number of individual deaths by this method in the UK over the past year too, but they are hard to identify from press reporting alone because of the media's restraint in covering such deaths.
- 6.15. In conclusion, it would appear that active intervention by Samaritans, assistance from the PCC in convening a joint meeting of national newspapers, and the cooperation and collective restraint of the national newspapers, may have prevented people in the UK from dying by this method of suicide.

²⁴ Gunnell D, Chang S and Page A (2011) *Internet Searches for a Specific Suicide Method Follow Its High-Profile Media Coverage*, AM J Psychiatry, 168:8. <http://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/data/Journals/AJP/4236/appi.ajp.2011.11020284.pdf>

SAMARITANS

7. Conclusions and recommendations

- 7.1. It is Samaritans' experience that newspapers have by-and-large been receptive to working with us on improving the reporting of suicide. It is also our experience that the press does broadly know of and understand the role it may play in contributing to copycat suicides. The press has taken steps individually and collectively to improve reporting in recent years and standards have improved. However, the press struggles to rein itself in collectively when an unusual or newsworthy suicide occurs, possibly because each individual title is concerned it will be left behind on the story. Nonetheless, the press is receptive to engagement from Samaritans and does take steps to improve when advised that its reporting of a story may be damaging.
- 7.2. In addition, we have found the PCC approachable, cooperative and willing to work constructively with us. They have assisted us to facilitate meetings with journalists and senior newspaper executives and have supported our proactive approach to asking newspapers to exercise restraint in instances where there is a high-profile case, novel method or potential suicide cluster.
- 7.3. We believe that the key to reducing the likelihood of media reporting resulting in imitative suicides is a preventative approach, working with the media ahead of any suicides so they are already aware of the possible consequences of their reporting. Once a suicide is poorly reported online, it can be partly mitigated by the rapid removal of detailed or damaging content. However, once a suicide is poorly reported in print, the damage is done and cannot be undone. Nothing, including an apology from a news outlet or a complaint being upheld by the PCC, can undo that damage.

Recommendation 1 – Amendments to the Editors' Code of Practice

- 7.4. In our experience the most damaging coverage is not lone or limited reporting with detailed coverage of complicated and sometimes gruesome methods of suicide, but rather mass, repetitive and/or prominent reporting of a suicide or suicides where, in fact, the method may be quite simple, presenting an 'attractive' mode of death to a vulnerable individual. Under the current Editors' Code of Practice, the former is the type of reporting more likely to be upheld as a complaint, whereas it is the latter that poses the greatest risk to public health.
- 7.5. Whilst some vulnerable people may simply read or hear about a method of suicide and copy it, a more potent influence is when they identify in some way with the person who has died and/or that person's circumstances, assimilate that the person has chosen suicide as a way out of their circumstances and then copy the method. A news report with a simple life story, for example, of a man who has taken his own life because his relationship has broken down or he has lost his job, combined with an easy-to-copy method (such as jumping from a high place, standing in front of a train or hanging himself), can thus put some vulnerable people at greater risk. It is our belief that this type of reporting is more likely to trigger copycat deaths than the type of reporting that currently triggers a successful complaint under the Editors' Code of Practice.
- 7.6. Therefore, while we appreciate that clause 5(ii) of the Editors' Code of Practice provides a mechanism by which to hold newspapers accountable for the level of detail they include about a suicide method, we believe that it does not allow two related but possibly more serious issues to be addressed:

SAMARITANS

- High levels of detail of a suicide method are not necessarily the sole trigger for a copycat death. It is more likely that the trigger is a combination of identification with the life story or circumstances of the person who has died, recognition that the person chose suicide as a solution to their problems (hence why it is always important that reporting never presents suicide as a natural, understandable or acceptable response to a problem or situation), and information about the suicide method that the subsequent person then copies.
- The trigger for a copycat death may be that it is brought to a vulnerable person's attention by prominent and repeated coverage across a number of media outlets. It might well be (as may have occurred in Bridgend) that no single report contains excessive detail at a level currently upheld by the PCC, but that the volume, prominence and sensationalism of the coverage contributes more significantly to the copycat effect than the levels of detail of the suicide methods.

7.7. It is also the case that media reports detailing a method of suicide may have an influence on vulnerable people even if they are not suicidal at the time they read or hear the report. Instead, they draw on their knowledge of methods when they enter a period of crisis later on in their lives. Recent research, including interviews about the influences on their choice of method with individuals who had made near-fatal suicide attempts, has found that media messages *"had longevity, several respondents drawing upon portrayals they had been exposed to earlier when not actively suicidal."*²⁵

7.8. To address these issues, Samaritans seeks a change to the current Editors' Code of Practice. While the wider guidance in the Editors' Codebook does acknowledge some of these effects, they are currently not codified, so there is a discrepancy between the exact wording of clause 5(ii) and the wider spirit of clause 5(ii). We believe that the impact of clause 5(ii) is limited by the inclusion of the word 'excessive'.

7.9. Therefore we recommend that clause 5(ii) be revised to remove the word 'excessive' and that newspapers be asked to look at whether any detail they are including is truly necessary to the reporting of the suicide.

7.10. We accept that it is unlikely that the method of suicide can be completely removed from some reporting, especially where the newsworthiness of the story revolves around the method of suicide rather than the circumstances of the person who has attempted or died by suicide.

7.11. But, where the newsworthiness is around the circumstances of the person who has died rather than the method, then we recommend that the clause is rewritten to ask newspapers to consider if mentioning the method of suicide at all is integral to the story.

7.12. If the method of suicide is newsworthy, then we recommend that the clause is rewritten to ask newspapers to consider if the reporting of any detail beyond the name of the method is truly necessary for the story to be understood by readers.

7.13. In summary, where a person has, for example, taken their life by hanging, we recommend that the press be asked to consider firstly whether the method is integral to the story or whether the fact that the person died by suicide is sufficient information for the reader to understand the article. Secondly, we recommend that the press be asked to consider if any

²⁵ Biddle, L., et al., *Information sources used by the suicidal to inform choice of method*, *J.Affect.Disord.* (2011), doi:10.1016/j.jad.2011.10.004

SAMARITANS

further detail, such as the place where the person hanged themselves or how they hanged themselves, is needed for readers to understand the story.

- 7.14. We recommend that the same test be applied in the Editors' Code of Practice to other methods of suicide such as overdose, jumping or gassing. However, as hanging is the leading cause of death by suicide, it is the method that requires the most urgent attention by the media.

Recommendation 2 – Greater powers for the regulator to prevent irresponsible coverage

- 7.15. Based on our experience of working with a wide range of media outlets over the past few years, Samaritans believes that the best approach to preventing poor reporting of suicide is to foster constructive relationships with the press, providing advice and building understanding about the benefits associated with responsible reporting of suicide.
- 7.16. However, it may also be beneficial to strengthen the regulatory powers of the PCC or any successor body with the potential to impose sanctions in a very limited number of cases.
- 7.17. One example may be where a publication has breached clause 5(ii) of the Editors' Code of Practice in a blatant, dangerous or gratuitous way or has repeatedly ignored advice to moderate inappropriate coverage. Appropriate sanctions could include the imposing of financial penalties or, in particularly serious cases, the suspension of the publication for one issue. These additional powers were recommended in the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee's report on Press Standards, Privacy and Libel in 2010.²⁶
- 7.18. Samaritans believes that the availability of greater powers for the PCC or any successor body would help to improve the credibility of the rulings it makes and would strengthen its ability to ensure that press standards, as defined by the Editors' Code of Practice, are upheld.
- 7.19. Such powers may also be a helpful tool when there is concern that public knowledge about new methods of suicide, such as in the Braintree/Putney/Buckinghamshire cases over the past year, might be spread through the mainstream media with tragic consequences for public health as has occurred in Japan²⁷ and Hong Kong.²⁸
- 7.20. They may help too in the event of a future high-profile case of the magnitude of the events in Bridgend, where additional powers would give the regulator authority to deal with excessive, irresponsible or intrusive press coverage.
- 7.21. While the use of such sanctions should only be deployed as a matter of last resort, the power to do so would enable the regulator to establish 'red lines' not to be crossed and thereby rein in newspapers individually and collectively when lives are at stake. This could enable the prevention of the worst kind of coverage where there is clear evidence that such reporting is likely to be harmful.

²⁶ Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee report on Press Standards, Privacy and Libel (2010) page 95, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcmums/362/362i.pdf>

²⁷ Gunnell D, Chang S, Page A, *Internet Searches for a Specific Suicide Method Follow Its High-Profile Media Coverage*, *AM J Psychiatry*, 168:8, (2011) <http://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/data/Journals/AJP/4236/appi.ajp.2011.11020284.pdf>

²⁸ Lee D, Chan K, Lee S & Yip PSF (2002) *Burning Charcoal: A novel and contagious method of suicide in Asia*, *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 59, 293-4

SAMARITANS

Recommendation 3 – A proactive role for the regulator

- 7.22.** As noted throughout this document, we believe that the reporting of suicide in the UK press has improved considerably since the events in Bridgend in 2007/08. Positive actions by the PCC and the commitment of time and resources from a range of organisations, including Samaritans, to building constructive relationships with the press has achieved some progress under the existing self-regulatory regime.
- 7.23.** However, the progress made over the last three years cannot be taken for granted. It is not necessarily the case that the public policy environment surrounding this issue will look the same in 5, 10 or 20 years' time; nor is it possible to guarantee that organisations such as Samaritans will always be in a position to invest resources in engaging with the media on suicide reporting. It is dangerous to risk a reversal of the recent progress that has been made.
- 7.24.** The progress made since the events in Bridgend must be maintained in the longer term and embedded within the activity carried out by the PCC or any successor body. It is essential that this kind of work continues in the future in order to ensure that journalists are aware of their responsibilities under the Editors' Code of Practice and that the level of potentially harmful reporting on suicide is kept to a minimum. Maintaining an industry-wide knowledge base on how to report suicide in a responsible way can help to contribute towards the prevention of deaths by suicide.
- 7.25.** We therefore recommend that a duty to monitor reporting of suicide, promote responsible reporting of suicide and support the press in delivering sensible and sensitive suicide reporting is included in the new regulatory regime's responsibilities.



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- 3. Returning your signed submission/statement will confirm that you are content for the Inquiry to publish it on its website in the form you have provided. If this is not the case and you have any concerns or wish for certain sections to be withheld please make this clear in any response.
- 4. Your signed submission, once received, will initially be provided to those groups who have been designated as Core Participants to the Inquiry (a full list is available on our website: www.levesoninquiry.org.uk).
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