

Guidance on reporting suicide

IPSO is regularly contacted by editors and journalists seeking advice on how the Editors' Code of Practice applies to the reporting of suicide.

A number of clauses in the Editors' Code are relevant to reporting suicide. These are Reporting Suicide (Clause 5), Intrusion into grief or shock (Clause 4), Accuracy (Clause 1), and Privacy (Clause 2).

This guidance provides editors and journalists with a framework for thinking through these issues and some examples of relevant decisions by IPSO's Complaints Committee.

Key points

- The Code does not seek to prevent reporting of suicide; there is a public interest in raising awareness of this significant public health issue.
- Care should be taken to limit the risk of vulnerable people being influenced by coverage of suicide and choosing to end their own lives.
- Journalists should be prepared to justify the inclusion of any detail of the method of suicide in a report.
- Particular care should be taken when reporting on novel methods of suicide.
- The fact of someone's death is not private. Deaths affect communities as well as individuals and are a legitimate subject for reporting.
- Journalists should show sensitivity towards people in a state of grief or shock. Reporting should be handled sensitively and appropriate consideration should be given to the wishes and needs of the bereaved.

The importance of reporting suicide – and the risks

There is a significant public interest in the reporting of suicide as it remains a significant public health concern. It is the leading cause of death in people under the age of 35 in the UK.

The death of an individual is a matter of public record and a death may affect a community as well as those who knew the individual personally. Journalists have a basic right to report the fact of a person's death, even if surviving family members would prefer for there to be no reporting and regard the death as private.

There is a public interest in the reporting of inquests, which are in any case public events. In reporting an inquest, a journalist may clear up any rumours or suspicion about the death. They may also draw attention to circumstances which may lead to further deaths or injuries if no preventative action is taken.

The reporting of suicide is covered by the Code's rules on intrusion into grief or shock, stressing the need for sympathy, discretion and sensitivity in publication. But journalists should also be aware that a failure to take care when reporting suicide can put vulnerable people at serious risk of harm.

Research Evidence

A wide body of research evidence shows that media portrayals of suicide, including information published by newspapers and magazines, can influence suicidal behaviour and lead to imitative acts, particularly among vulnerable groups or young people. The research shows that overly detailed reporting does not just influence the choice of method of a suicide, but can lead to additional deaths which would otherwise not have occurred.

Researchers in Taiwan found that increases in the reporting of suicides involving charcoal were associated with increases in the incidence of suicides using the same method on the following day, with each reported news item being associated with a 16% increase in next day suicides. There was no corresponding decrease in other methods of suicide.

In Vienna, rates of suicide on the subway system decreased significantly after the imposition of new media guidelines which included restricting the amount of detail given about the method of suicide.

More recently, researchers in America looking into the rates of suicide following the death of Robin Williams noted a rapid increase in suicides, specifically suffocation suicides, in the five months following his death that paralleled the time and method of Williams' death. They also noted a dramatic increase in news media reports on suicides and Robin Williams during this same period. The researchers make clear that it is uncertain whether his death led to the increased number of suicides – but there did appear to be a connection between the events.

While this research indicates the potential dangers of certain types of reporting on suicides, there is a growing body of evidence showing the benefits of sensitive coverage of suicide, including interviews with people who have overcome a crisis. It can actually help vulnerable people by encouraging them to seek help and reducing the stigma around the subject.

Excessive detail of the method of suicide

There are different ways in which reporting may increase the risk of vulnerable people choosing to take their own life. The Code focusses on the issue of restricting unnecessary reporting of the details of the method of suicide.

What is meant by excessive detail?

Journalists must not publish excessive detail of a method of suicide to limit the possibility of simulative acts. Journalists are required to make difficult judgements as to which details, heard during the course of inquest proceedings, they publish. It is not possible to quantify from the research the level of risk posed by individual details, so editors – and ultimately IPSO’s Complaints Committee – must make a judgement about what is excessive in a particular context.

In order to decide if a detail is excessive, you should consider whether it is necessary to explain the events you are reporting. Also consider whether the detail could help someone to take their own life.

Sometimes there may be specific justification for including detail about the method, for example because it is central to the coroner’s conclusion on the cause of a death; in those instances this detail may not be “excessive”.

Journalists should still take great care in selecting what details to include and should be prepared to explain the decision.

You may find it helpful to adopt the following three step process, to ensure compliance with the Code:

1. Identify any information within the article about the method of suicide which needs to be assessed against the Code.
2. Analyse whether the details you plan to include are excessive, taking into account the context in which the suicide took place – what is the rationale for publishing this information?
3. Consider how the information will be published (particularly if publishing online).

Publishing the article

You should review any of the supporting information you publish either in print or online to illustrate the article, to make sure it does not provide any details as to the method of suicide. Take care with information like texts, videos or photo captions. Any editorial decisions about how to present reporting on suicide should be shared with all relevant staff, to ensure a uniform approach.

Novel methods of suicide

You should take particular care when reporting on a novel method of suicide, to prevent attention being drawn to a new method and the risk of others using this method. When reporting on novel methods, the threshold of what might be considered ‘excessive’ is likely to be lower given the possibility that the report might draw attention to this method.

Key questions

1. What details are you going to include in your report about the death?
2. Do any details relate to the method of suicide?
3. Is the method of suicide you are reporting on novel?
4. If so, what is your justification for including those details?
5. Have you considered how the material will be presented online to ensure that you do not publish excessive detail of the method?

Sensitivity in reporting

It is important to remember that other Clauses of the Code that are particularly relevant in the context of deaths, such as Clause 4 (Intrusion into grief or shock) and Clause 1 (Accuracy), also apply to the reporting of suicide.

Deaths are public matters. The death of an individual is a matter of public record and their death may affect a community as well as those who knew the individual personally. Journalists have a right to report the fact of a person's death, even if surviving family members would prefer for there to be no reporting and regard the death as private.

There is a public interest in the reporting of inquests, which are public events in any case. In reporting an inquest, a journalist may clear up any rumours or suspicion about the death. They may also draw attention to circumstances which may lead to further deaths or injuries if no preventative action is taken.

You should be aware, however, that not all families will know that journalists can report the findings of inquests, or want them to. The Code makes clear that in cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion and publication handled sensitively. When approaching families for comment at an inquest, journalists must do so with

appropriate regard for the fact that inquests may be extremely distressing to the bereaved. Journalists must cease questioning, pursuing or photographing members of the public if asked to do so by that person or their representative.

Journalists should also consider the language that they use to describe the person who has died, or the manner in which the person died. Mocking the individual, or the manner in which they died, could potentially raise concerns under Clause 4 of the Code.

You should be aware that bereavement by suicide can be complex and carries particular sensitivities: some families may have hoped to keep the nature of the death a secret, or to withhold it from certain family members. You should also be aware that people who are bereaved by suicide are at increased risk of suicide contagion. While this does not, and should not, prevent reporting of a verdict of suicide, these are good reasons to take particular care over the presentation of the inquest report where suicide is involved.

Publishing photos of those who died

Journalists must also use sensitivity when choosing the pictures or videos they will use to illustrate a story about the death of an individual. Editors and journalists should consider what the photos or video show and the context of the individual's death in deciding which photos to publish. It may be helpful to approach the family of those who died, to see if there is a particular photo that they would prefer.

Attributing a cause to suicide

In most cases, an inquest into a suspected suicide will include evidence as to the person's state of mind leading up to their death, and any factors that may have contributed to a possible decision to take their own life. This is likely to include extremely personal information, for example the deceased's relationships, financial position, any criminal activity, or the deceased's mental or physical health.

It is important that this information is heard in an inquest, so that the

coroner can thoroughly investigate the circumstances surrounding a death.

The circumstances around a suicide can be complicated. It may be difficult to reduce that complexity in a way which makes it easy for readers to understand. However, it is essential to distinguish between claims made at the inquest about possible factors, and any conclusions made by the coroner about how the deceased came to their death. Be careful to avoid claiming that a single factor or factors "caused" the death unless this was a finding by the coroner.

Key questions

1. How will you approach the family at inquest?
2. Have you considered the effect of your behaviour on the family of the deceased?
3. How have you checked the accuracy of your reporting of the inquest?
4. If you are including photos of the deceased, how have you chosen the photos you are publishing?

Reporting online crazes linked to suicide

Widespread social media use has brought with it concerns about circulation of material which may encourage vulnerable groups to consider self-harm or suicide. There have been a number of examples of online crazes (such as 'Blue Whale' and 'Momo') which appear to encourage vulnerable groups, particularly children and young people, to undertake increasingly risky challenges which have been linked to suicide and self-harm. To date there has been no officially confirmed evidence linking specific challenges to suicidal and self-harming behaviour in the UK.

There is a public interest in reporting on these challenges. It can raise awareness, signpost parents and carers to support and hold public authorities to account. Under Clause 1 (Accuracy) publications are entitled to report claims and speculation about these challenges, but should take care to present them as such.

Journalists should consider the source of these claims, the credibility of that source and whether the information can be verified from another source, before deciding on whether and how they will report these claims.

Other issues of relevance

The Editors' Code of Practice focusses on preventing the publication of excessive detail of a method of suicide. Separate to this, there are other issues that journalists should be aware of when reporting on suicide. These issues do not engage with the Code but are relevant to the reporting of suicide.

Language

IPSO does not seek to limit the language that journalists can use to describe suicide. However, journalists should be aware that the Suicide Act 1961 decriminalised the act of suicide. Many organisations working in the area of suicide prevention are concerned about the use of the phrase 'commit suicide' and argue that the phrasing stigmatises suicide and is insensitive to those affected by suicide. They prefer to refer to a person's decision to take their own life, or that they died by suicide.

Celebrity or high profile suicides

Research shows that placing significant detail of the method of suicide into the public domain can lead to imitative behaviour. The likelihood of imitative behaviour can be increased when the suicide is reported extensively and in a prominent way, or when individuals identify with the person who has died, as happens with [celebrity suicides](#). Journalists should carefully consider what information they are going to publish about the suicide and the

prominence which they give the story when published.

Suicides of young people

There is naturally a public interest in the reporting of the death of a young person, or cluster of young people. The deaths of young people in particular affect a wider community and can often lead to an outpouring of grief, which journalists may want to report.

But journalists should be aware that young people, particularly those affected by suicide, are at increased risk of suicidal behaviour. Journalists should consider carefully whether to publish comments which romanticise suicidal behaviour, or which might suggest that suicide is a way of responding to the difficulties that people might be experiencing.

Reporting clusters of suicides

The coverage of clusters of suicides is a particularly challenging area for journalists. There is a public interest in the reporting of clusters of suicides and, in doing so, holding public authorities to account for taking steps to prevent suicides.

However, the reporting of clusters of suicides can draw attention

to the number of deaths, risks sensationalising the deaths and leading to an increase in imitative behaviour. Journalists should consider how they present the reporting of clusters, to prevent imitative behaviour; it may be helpful to avoid terminology or presentation that focusses heavily on the number or frequency of deaths as this could have the unintended effect of “promoting” the cluster.

Signposting to sources of help

The coverage of suicide can be distressing to readers. Editors may find it helpful to signpost people reading these articles to sources of support by including the contact details for The Samaritans, Papyrus, or other relevant organisations in any articles reporting on a suicide.

Key issues to consider

1. What language are you using in your report to describe the suicide?
2. What prominence will you give your report about suicide? What is the reasoning for that?
3. How will you report the suicide of a young person?
4. Have you included contact details for appropriate organisations in your article?

Relevant complaints

Dayman v Northampton Chronicle and Echo

Dayman v Gloucestershire Echo

Two newspapers reported on the death of a woman who died as a result of an overdose. Both newspapers identified the substance she ingested and stated that ingesting a high level of the substance can be fatal. The Northampton Chronicle and Echo also included details of the amount of the substance used, what it was mixed with and the amount of the substance which constituted a lethal dose. These details were not published in the Gloucestershire Echo article.

The Committee upheld the complaint against the Northampton Chronicle and Echo, ruling that the details published were excessive as they were sufficient to support an individual in engaging in a simulative act. The Committee did not uphold the complaint against the Gloucestershire Echo.

Jones v The Forester

An inquest report in The Forester specified the ligature which a man had used to end his life by hanging. The newspaper said there was a public interest in reporting the circumstances of the death as it had been the subject of rumours in the local area.

The item used as a ligature was a readily available item in the home and its identification was not necessary to correct the record on the circumstances of the death. The publication of the ligature used was excessive and presented the possibility that it might lead to simulative acts. The complaint was therefore upheld as a breach of Clause 5.

Hartley v Lancaster Guardian

There may be occasions on which it is appropriate to report more detailed information of the method of suicide if it is relevant to the findings of an inquest that is being reported on. Details of the method used may be relevant to a coroner's verdict on whether a death is an accidental death or a suicide.

In this case, detail about the position of a shotgun used in a suicide had been expressly cited by the coroner as key to her conclusion that the person had intended to kill themselves, despite the family's disagreement about the person's intentions. The inclusion of this information was not therefore excessive in the context of this particular case, and the complaint was not upheld.

Further support

IPSO has a [series of blogs](#) for journalists on reporting suicide, covering a range of different topics and a [podcast](#) on reporting suicide responsibly.

We can provide non-binding, 24-hour [pre-publication advice](#) on the Editors Code if there are any concerns about articles prior to publication.

Other organisations you may wish to contact

[Samaritans](#) publish their own guidelines on reporting suicides for the media and provide an [advice service for journalists](#)

[Papyrus](#) focus on the prevention of youth suicides and provide some [resources](#) for journalists

[Mind](#) runs a [media advisory service](#) focusing on the reporting of mental health, including suicide.