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Vintage Lorries

Memorable stories of times gone by



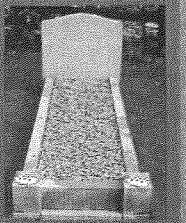
Hearse House

Historic Victorian house needs saving



Stone Safe

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Journal The

Press Complaints Commission

A single death tends to affect a multitude of people. Most relatives will want time to grieve and reflect in private to help them come to terms with their loss. But what happens if news of a death unexpectedly becomes public by a report published in a newspaper? The Press Complaints Commission, an independent, self-regulatory body set up to deal with complaints about the editorial content of newspapers and magazines, frequently speaks to relatives and friends of the deceased who are unhappy about the press coverage of a death.

Unless restricted otherwise by the courts, newspapers are entitled to report most details that emerge in court cases and inquests. This will often include the names and addresses of the people involved. However, the public is often unaware of this principle and it can come as something of a shock to see often detailed information about the death of a loved one.

This is not to say, however, that newspapers have carte blanche to report what and how they see fit. The Code of Practice administered by the PCC contains a number of provisions that are relevant to court or inquest coverage. Over the years, the PCC has

briefed coroners and witness services to explain these rules. However, as first ports of call for many bereaved families, funeral directors might find it useful to bear them in mind, too, should the need arise to pass on advice about media reporting of a death:

- The press must take care not to publish inaccurate or misleading information;
- The press must not include excessive detail when reporting suicide, in order to minimise the risk of copycat cases. For example, a newspaper which published an inquest report that revealed precisely how a man had electrocuted himself was therefore criticised by the Commission;
- The press must not identify victims of sexual assault or publish material likely to contribute to such identification. Minor details – such as a description of the victim's appearance or the location of the assault – have been found to be in breach of the Code;
- The press must also pay particular regard to the potentially vulnerable position of children who witness, or are victims of, crime;
- In cases involving personal grief and shock, publication should be handled sensitively, and gratuitous or jovial references avoided.

If these requirements are not met, the PCC can seek redress that is free, quick and effective. If a formal complaint is made under the Code, the PCC will work to mediate between the complainant and the publication concerned to obtain an appropriate settlement. This might take the form of the publication of an apology, correction, letter or follow-up article; a private letter of apology from the editor; or the removal of inaccurate material from a website. We survey complainants for their feedback on an ongoing basis, and have consistently achieved good feedback about our services.

PRESS COMPLAINTS COMMISSION

The PCC can also deal with problems of physical harassment. Unless there is a strong public interest reason, journalists must not follow or persistently question people once they have been asked to desist.

We can help with such unwanted approaches by passing on private advisory notices to relevant editors and broadcasters. These have a very high rate of success.

When reporting suicide, care should be taken to avoid excessive detail about the method used. (S.5 (ii) of the code)

We publish a range of literature to explain our services, and regularly conduct seminars and training sessions for anyone interested in our work. BIFD Members who would like further information are encouraged to contact the PCC's Communications Officer, on catherine.speller@pcc.org.uk.

www.pcc.org.uk

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. (S.5 (i) of the code)

