



Helping the media to report suicide responsibly

NHS Health Scotland has played a key role in shaping new guidance for journalists which will help to reduce the risk of copycat suicides

The Press Complaints Commission (PCC) is probably best known for its role in adjudicating complaints about newspaper stories. One of the biggest challenges it faces is balancing the public's right to know with the rights of the individual, and this is never more important than in the reporting of suicide, which can have tragic consequences. If coverage glamorises suicide or gives too much detail of the methods used, it can encourage imitation or 'copycat' suicides.

The benchmark for the PCC's work is its Code of Practice and a guidance document known as The Editors' Codebook. The Codebook is written by the Editor's Code of Practice Committee and published jointly by the trade associations that fund national, regional and local press self-regulation in Britain. It's an essential guide to how the PCC interprets the Code of Practice.

The media has a right to report a death as soon as it is confirmed as a matter of public record, but must take due care to present facts with sympathy and discretion. When reporting suicide, the Code specifically states that excessive detail about the method used should be avoided, to prevent unintentional distress to those who have been affected by suicide and protect more vulnerable readers who may be at risk.

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William Gore, Public Affairs Director, PCC

When the Committee decided to update and extend the Codebook earlier this year, Choose Life (whose strategy includes an objective to support the media in reporting suicide responsibly) fed into the consultation. Dougie Paterson, Programme Manager, together with Laura Blair, Communications Manager, and Darren Rocks, Project Officer, worked with the Committee to shape the new guidance.

William Gore, the PCC's Public Affairs Director told *rude health*, "The PCC has developed a good working relationship

with Choose Life over the past year or so. The team was instrumental in bringing to our attention a particularly crass piece of reporting, which the PCC subsequently censured. Our ruling in that matter added significantly to our case law in the area of suicide reporting, and is highlighted in the recently launched second edition of The Editors' Codebook."

The new edition has a greatly expanded section on the way that suicides are reported. As well as providing actual examples of stories likely to glorify suicide and of excessive editorial or graphical content, the guidance also suggests discretionary measures which the press can take to avoid unintentional distress and minimise the risk of unnecessary deaths.

The new guidance is just one step along the road towards the end goal of all press media reporting suicide sensitively, appropriately and responsibly. Dougie sees several encouraging trends: "Newspapers increasingly add helpline numbers to stories concerned with suicide. It is especially encouraging to see that the Editors' Committee is responsive to changing attitudes towards the reporting of suicide by recommending this in the 2009 revision."