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Planning ahead

What to do first when someone dies

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Coping with the media

For most bereaved people their grief is a private matter, shared with family and friends. Their only contact with the media is to place a death notice in the appropriate newspaper if they choose to do so.

Some deaths such as a result of an accident, a major disaster, suicide or homicide may attract the attention of journalists. Some families may welcome this opportunity to tell the story of what has happened, but for others this is an unwelcome intrusion. Help is available if this is the case.

If police have been involved in investigating the death, a family liaison officer will be able to offer advice on issuing a statement to the media using the police press office. If the death has taken place in a hospital, they may also have a public relations department which may be able to assist.

Ofcom (the Office of Communications) has a Code for broadcasters (i.e. TV and radio) which states that they should not take or broadcast film or audio recordings of people who have suffered a personal tragedy unless it is warranted or the people concerned have given consent. However, what is thought to be warranted in the public interest is a matter of debate. In particular, broadcasters should be careful not to reveal the identity of anyone who has died until it is clear that next of kin have been informed or broadcasting is warranted (e.g. police have requested the identity be released because they have been unable to trace next of kin). Ofcom can only respond to complaints after a programme has been broadcast if it is believed to have been an intrusion into privacy. If you believe the programme content was inaccurate, the broadcaster should be addressed directly.

There is a 24 hour emergency number (agreed by Ofcom and the Press Complaints Commission for print media) that a family can telephone if they feel harassed because a journalist has approached them. Staff on the number will forward the family's concerns but cannot guarantee that a journalist will withdraw. The number is 07659 152656. This is called a 'desist' message.

If you are concerned about publicity that may appear in a newspaper or magazine (including their on-line sites) you can seek the advice of the Press Complaints Commission who may be able to speak with the publication to ensure the Editors' Code of Practice about respect for privacy is adhered to.

Press Complaints Commission Helpline: 0845 6002757
Textphone (main switchboard): 020 7831 0123

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