

Mrs Dorothy Yeoman v Rhondda Leader

Clauses noted: 5

Mrs Dorothy Yeoman, of London W1, complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article published in the Rhondda Leader on 15 January 2004 headlined "Starving pet starts to devour pensioner" was insensitive at a time of grief in breach of Clause 5 (Intrusion into grief) of the Code of Practice.

The complaint was upheld.

The article reported the recent death of a man, who had collapsed in his home. His sister complained that the article was distressing and included unnecessarily sensationalist details.

The newspaper appreciated that the complainant was obviously distressed by her brother's death. However, it said that its enquiries – which were based on information provided by a member of the public and then confirmed by two sources – were made with sympathy and discretion. Given the unusual circumstances of the case, it would have been easy to publish a sensationalised article, but the newspaper believed that the construction of the story and its headline had been handled sympathetically and with appropriate sensitivity.

Adjudication

The protection of the vulnerable is at the heart of the Code of Practice – and the Commission recognises that close relatives of deceased people are particularly vulnerable in the immediate aftermath of a death. That is why Clause 5 relates both to the manner in which news is gathered and to the publication of the news, requiring that newspapers handle stories 'sensitively' at such times.

Any judgement about whether such pieces are sufficiently sensitive will inevitably be subjective to some degree, but the Commission felt in this case that the overall tone of the article and the gratuitous inclusion of some of the detail resulted in a breach of the Code. In upholding the complaint, the Commission bore in mind that the article had been written shortly after the death – and before the funeral – and that the details had not been officially put into the public domain, for example as a result of an inquest.

Relevant rulings

Thornhill v News and Star, 2001
Harvey v Rochdale Observer, 1999
Head v Luton on Sunday, 1998

Adjudication issued 2004