

Mr and Mrs Marsh v Reading Chronicle

Clauses noted: 5

Mr and Mrs Marsh of Caversham complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article published in the Reading Chronicle on 15th January 2009, headlined "Lucy was a 'soul in torment'", contained excessive detail about a method of suicide in breach of Clause 5 (Intrusion into grief or shock) of the editors' Code of Practice.

The complaint was upheld.

The article reported the suicide of the complainants' daughter, who had taken her own life by consuming poisonous leaves. It set out the following details: the precise type of leaf that had been used; the fact that the leaves had been ingested; the specific type of toxin found in the leaves; and the fact that death would have been quick as there was no antidote.

The newspaper said it had taken care to remove a reference to how the leaves were prepared which, in its view, was the sole detail that could have led to copy-cat suicides. It considered that it was important to report the fundamental cause of death and said this particular method of suicide was 'not that rare'. The complainants disputed both these points.

Adjudication

The purpose of Clause 5 (ii) is to minimise the risk of copycat suicides by requiring that care is taken not to publish excessive detail of the method used in suicide cases. This requirement extends to the reporting of inquests.

On this occasion, the Commission considered that the level of detail was excessive. The information in the piece included the type of leaf used; how the deceased found out about it; the fact there was no antidote; and a reference to the speed of the process. Taken together, the Commission was concerned that this information may have been sufficient to spell out to others how to carry out such a suicide. There was therefore a breach of the Code and the complaint was upheld.

Adjudication issued 30/04/2009