

A woman v The News (Portsmouth)

Clauses noted: 5

A woman complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article published in The News (Portsmouth) on 3 December 2009, headlined 'Pill woman telephoned number to say goodbye', contained excessive detail about the way in which her mother had taken her own life in breach of Clause 5 (ii) (Intrusion into grief or shock) of the Editors' Code of Practice.

The complaint was upheld.

The article reported the death by suicide of the woman's mother. It noted that, following her death, her handbag had been found to contain pill packets for a set number of a named anti-depressant. It went on to report the precise quantity of pills that were missing and the dosage she had ingested (compared to the therapeutic dose). The article also referred to the amount of alcohol found in her blood. The complainant said the reported detail was excessive.

After initially defending the level of information in the article (all of the details having been heard at the inquest into the complainant's mother's death), the editor acknowledged that the reference to the number of missing pills might be considered excessive. He agreed to amend the online version of the story and circulated information to all staff about the requirements of Clause 5 (Intrusion into grief or shock) of the Code.

Adjudication

Newspapers are quite entitled to report inquests but when doing so they must take account of the requirements of the Editors' Code. In this case, the article contained the name of the anti-depressant, the number of pills missing from the packet and the post-mortem result showing the level of drugs in the deceased's system. Taken together, the Commission considered that this was sufficient information to spell out to readers the precise method of death. The Commission concluded that this level of detail was excessive and had led to an avoidable breach of Clause 5 (ii) of the Code.

The complaint was therefore upheld.

The complainant also said that the article showed a failure to handle publication sensitively at a time of grief and shock in breach of Clause 5 (i) (Intrusion into grief or shock). In particular, she was upset at the inclusion of details about how her mother's body had been found and the description in the headline of her mother as 'pill woman'. She was also concerned at the inclusion of her parents' address.

The newspaper said the report was fair and accurate and that publication had been handled sensitively. The editor agreed, however, to amend the headline and apologised for any additional distress that had been caused as a result of the report.

Adjudication

The Commission quite understood the complainant's distress at reading details about how her late mother had been found. However, it did not consider that the newspaper had failed to deal with publication sensitively in breach of the Code.

The Commission started from the position that the reporting of inquests was an important function of the press, especially for local and regional papers. It was right in a free society that newspapers

should be able to cover hearings held in public and inform a community about the death of one of its members. On this occasion, the Commission was satisfied that the newspaper had not handled the information in a flippant or careless manner, and that the story was a serious reflection of a tragic incident. It understood the complainant's particular concern about the headline and was pleased that the editor had agreed to amend it online. However, it did not consider that this amounted to a breach of the Code.

This part of the complaint was not upheld.

Adjudication issued 28/01/2010