



Ministry of
JUSTICE

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Sig.
Over to you.*

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Sir Christopher Meyer
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Dear Sir Christopher

Sensitive reporting in coroners' courts

You will recall that you wrote to Harriet Harman in September last year, during the consultation on the draft Coroners Bill, expressing concern about the proposal to introduce reporting restrictions in the coroners' courts.

Clause 30 of the draft Bill introduced a proposed new discretionary power for coroners, when an investigation was to conclude with an inquest, to prevent the publication of the name of the deceased or any information that might lead to their identification. The expectation was that this might be applied in exceptionally sensitive cases, such as apparent suicides or child deaths, where there were no public interest issues, and where significant distress could be caused to bereaved families if details were reported in the media.

The Prime Minister announced in October this year that this proposal has now been removed from the Bill. This followed an independently facilitated workshop in July, attended by stakeholders with an interest in the issue, including Stephen Abell on behalf of the Press Complaints Commission.

The event made clear that the initial support expressed by some stakeholders in favour of the proposal had diminished. In general, those present thought that if the proposal went forward it would be likely to raise the expectations of families that there would be a genuine possibility of reporting restrictions being applied in the generality of cases, when the intention was always that they would be applied exceptionally. It was felt also that such a policy would limit the public scrutiny of coroners' courts and would be likely to give rise to a substantial number of appeals against coroners' decisions (to the new Chief Coroner also enabled by the Bill), either from the press on the one hand or from bereaved families on the other.

As an alternative, it was suggested that work could be taken forward on considering whether current codes of conduct for the press might be refined to ensure that there is appropriate emphasis on the need for sensitive reporting of cases in the coroners' courts. There was widespread support for this proposal amongst the event attendees. I am of course aware that

that the Code of Practice under which the PCC takes complaints contains clauses relevant to the sensitive treatment of the bereaved and also a clause specifically relevant to reporting of suspected suicides. However, I am keen to explore whether there might be room for further refinement. I also think it would be beneficial to explore how the bereaved might be better informed about the possible presence of the media and how they can object to inappropriate or insensitive reporting.

If acceptable to you, I would like to ask my officials to arrange a meeting with yours to discuss how we might take this work forward.

*Kind regards
Bridget Prentice*

BRIDGET PRENTICE