

Deaths and inquests

Guidance for journalists and editors

Key Points

- A person's death is a matter of public record and may affect a community as well as those who knew them.
- The press should take care not to break news of a person's death to the immediate members of their family.
- Once immediate family are aware, journalists can report a person's death, even if surviving family members would prefer for there to be no reporting and regard the death as private.
- Journalists should show sensitivity towards people in a state of grief or shock. Reporting should be handled sensitively, and appropriate consideration should be given to the wishes and needs of the bereaved.
- Care should be taken with the reporting of suicide, by avoiding excessive details of the method used, to reduce the risk of other people copying the same method.

About this guidance

IPSO is regularly contacted by editors and journalists seeking advice on how the Editors' Code of Practice applies to the reporting of deaths. This is an important subject for editors and journalists to cover, at both a local and national level.

This guidance explains how the Editors' Code applies to the reporting of deaths and inquests, including funerals, breaking news stories, and contacting people for comment in the aftermath of a death.

This guidance does not replace or supersede the Editors' Code but is designed to support editors and journalists. It includes case studies of relevant decisions by IPSO's Complaints Committee. The case studies are summaries of the decisions of the Committee, and it is recommended that the decisions are read in full.

The Editors' Code

[The Editors' Code of Practice](#) sets the framework for the highest professional standards for journalists and the rules that newspapers and magazines, which are regulated by IPSO, must follow.

This guidance focuses on the application of Clause 1 (Accuracy) and Clause 4 (Intrusion into grief or shock).

Handling approaches

Clause 4 (Intrusion into grief and shock) requires that enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion. It is important to note that this does not restrict the right to report legal proceedings such as inquests.

Making approaches

Journalists must make decisions about how to approach a family with sympathy and sensitivity. They should consider the effect of their behaviour on the family of the deceased, before making an approach. This includes:

- The tone of the approaches or the piece.
- The timing of the approach.

Funerals

IPSO receives requests from journalists for pre-publication advice relating to funerals and other ceremonies following a death, because attitudes by bereaved family members to such events vary widely. Some families regard funerals and memorial services as opportunities to bring the community together to mourn

the death, and celebrate the life, of their loved one. They may accept, or even welcome, press coverage. Other families regard funerals as intensely private events and find any attendance at the service or location by journalists or coverage to be intrusive and distressing.

Journalists must make judgments about what constitutes appropriate sensitivity based on the specific circumstances, which includes the wishes of the family where they are known or can reasonably be inferred, based on the nature of the event. The Code does not require that publications contact families in advance of publishing reports of a death to comply with Clause 4; rather, it states that any such inquiries, if made, should be handled sensitively.

Some parts of a funeral, such as a funeral procession, may happen in public view. However, care should be taken with photographs of people in states of extreme distress. Journalists can always contact IPSO for advice on these situations.

Families will sometimes ask IPSO to issue a private advisory notice to cover a funeral, to communicate their request that the funeral is a private event and that journalists should not seek to attend.

Questions relating to funerals

- If you are considering attending a funeral, is it public or the funeral of someone in the public eye; and do you know what the family's wishes are?
- Does any information you are thinking of publishing from tributes contain anything private about a living person?
- Have you considered the effect of your behaviour (including when making approaches) on the family of the deceased?

[Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi and the Al Qasimi family v Mail Online](#)

Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi and the Al Qasimi family complained about two articles, one of which reported on the funeral of Prince Khalid. The complainants said that the publication's coverage and the timing of its articles – on the day of Prince Khalid's funeral – and that publishing images and video of the funeral ceremony was insensitive. In one image the publication had zoomed in on the face of the prince's grieving father.

While the Committee understood that the complainants had found the coverage distressing to read, it was not in breach of the Code for the publication to have reported the alleged circumstances of Prince Khalid's death on the day of the funeral. The images and video had been placed in the public domain with the family's consent and showed a televised state funeral of a prominent member of the Sharjah royal family, rather than a private occasion.

It was not insensitive for the publication to have republished the broadcast footage and taken still images from it to illustrate its coverage.

Handling publication

Coverage

Clause 4 requires that publication of information relating to a person's death is handled sensitively.

When reporting, it is important to consider:

- Whether the individual or the manner of their death is mocked or sensationalised.
- Whether graphic information is included.

Photographs and video

Journalists must also use sensitivity when choosing the pictures or videos they will use to illustrate a story about the death of an individual. It is a good idea to ask the family if they have a preferred photograph of the individual. Care should be taken with the selection of photos of the recently deceased. In addition, editors and journalists should also consider what the photos show and the context of the individual's death.

[Talbot v The Sunday Telegraph](#)

A couple complained about an article which reported on the death of their son and subsequent legal action. They said that the online article used a family photograph without their permission.

The reporter had informed the complainants' representative that the newspaper planned to use it in an article. She had received no indication that this was unwelcome. In any event, the photograph was publicly available on social media, and did not include any embarrassing or belittling information about the complainants' son.

Neither the information reported in the article, nor the photograph used in the online article represented a failure to handle publication sensitively. Nevertheless, the Committee welcomed the newspaper's offer to remove the photograph when this had caused the complainants distress.

News organisations play an important role in reporting on accidents and fatalities that occur in public, and even when this is done sensitively, this will often cause great distress to the families of individuals involved. The terms of Clause 4 (Intrusion into grief or shock) do not prohibit reporting on distressing circumstances and events, but rather set out that such publication should be handled sensitively.

Questions relating to publication considerations

- Does your article imply that you are mocking the individual or sensationalising the manner of their death?
- Are you thinking of publishing photos which show the individual engaged in an embarrassing activity or distressing circumstances?
- Are you including graphic information at a time of grief?

Family of Tony Carroll v Mail Online

The family of a man killed by a police car, complained about an online article which included CCTV footage leading up to the moment of impact.

The man could be seen stepping out into the road, and the car could be seen approaching; the video faded out a moment before he was hit by the car. The Committee understood that the video must have been deeply distressing for the family to view. The Committee also considered that the footage had been taken from some distance, in relatively low resolution, so that the man's features and appearance were not clear in the video, which featured no sound. The video had not included the moment of impact, or footage of the man following the accident.

The Committee acknowledged the justification for the inclusion of the footage in the article, which allowed readers to better understand the circumstances leading up to the accident. This was particularly the case given that the accident had involved a member of the public and a police car responding to an emergency. The Committee considered that the publication of the video had been handled sensitively. There was no breach of Clause 4.

Breaking the news

Often when journalists are reporting on the death of an individual, they are reporting on breaking news. Immediate family members should not expect to be made aware of the death of a family member by a journalist. That means taking care that the immediate family is aware before publishing the name of a person who has died in an incident or approaching them for comment.

Journalists should also carefully consider whether they may inadvertently identify the deceased and thereby break the news of the death. For example, photos of the scene of a road traffic accident might lead to a family identifying a victim if it includes a vehicle's number plate or other distinctive characteristics.

A complaint against the Lincolnshire Echo was upheld when it broke the news of the death of a woman in a terror attack.

Lincolnshire Police v Lincolnshire Echo

Lincolnshire Police complained about an article which reported that a local woman had been killed in a terrorist attack in Tunisia. At the time, her family only knew that she had been involved in the attack and had been injured. Reporters had contacted various family, friends, and colleagues of the woman. One source, who was close to the family, had confirmed that she had been killed.

However, neither the death nor the family's knowledge of it had been confirmed by any official source. As the newspaper had relied solely on confidential sources, it had been unable to show that it had taken appropriate care before it took the decision to publish to ensure that the family knew the woman had been killed. It had therefore failed to demonstrate to the Committee that it had acted with the level of sensitivity required by the Code. The publication of the information that the woman had died, so soon after the attack and before it had been confirmed to her immediate family, was a serious failure to handle publication sensitively and a breach of the Code.

In contrast, an article about a man being injured in a stabbing did not breach the Code as it was clear that his family were aware of the incident.

[Morse v worcesternews.co.uk](https://www.worcesternews.co.uk)

A woman complained about an article which reported on claims that a man had been stabbed. The article said the man had been “named locally” and gave his name. The complainant said that the article was published just four hours after the incident occurred and the family had not been fully notified – the victim’s sister and daughter had found out after seeing the article on social media. The Committee found that as the information about the attack had been reported on social media, and it was clear that family were aware of his involvement, the publication of the article was not insensitive.

A reporter acting on behalf of the publication had contacted the complainant’s family members for comment by a Facebook message. In this instance, the message was written sympathetically. Furthermore, when one of the family members had requested the publication to desist from contacting them, the reporter had respected this. The Committee found that there was no breach of Clause 4 on either point.

Shock

Clause 4 does not only apply to a time of grief involving a death, it includes shock. One complaint upheld under Clause 4 for this reason was **Brian and Declan Arthurs v Sunday World** (see opposite).

Questions relating to shock

- Are you intruding into an individual’s personal grief or shock by publishing the information?
- Are you handling publication sensitively?

[Brian and Declan Arthurs v Sunday World](#)

Two people complained about an article which reported that one of the complainants was in intensive care, being treated for Covid-19. They said the article had caused considerable distress to the family at a time when he was likely to die, and that this was insensitive and a breach of Clause 4 (Intrusion into grief or shock).

The article referred to his past convictions for terrorism and fraud, and his alleged ongoing involvement in criminal activity. In the view of the Committee, the publication of the article was not handled with sensitivity or care at a time of shock. The article revealed private medical information whilst the complainant was in an intensive care unit in hospital. This amounted to a breach of Clause 4.

Reports of historic events

Publications often report on historic events to mark anniversaries or to commemorate local people who died in terrible circumstances. There is no requirement under the Code to provide a justification for the simple re-publication of the fact of a crime; this is because to impose such a restriction would unduly restrict the right of publications to report on public legal proceedings.

Journalists should be aware that the anniversary of a death or a major incident, even many years after, can be extremely distressing to the families and friends of those who died, as well as to survivors of those incidents.

Gregory v Plymouth Herald

A woman complained about an article which reported on a historic murder case involving the murder of her sister in 1996. She said that the publication of a detailed and graphic account of the murder and trial, twenty-two years after the crime had occurred was insensitive and had been deeply disturbing and upsetting for her family. She was also concerned that the article had published some aspects of the case online for the first time, making it accessible to younger family members. Despite the years that had passed, the Committee considered that given the traumatic nature of the events and the effect on the complainant and her family, Clause 4 was engaged by the complaint.

The question for the Committee was whether the republication of this material after such a long period in itself constituted handling publication insensitively. Given the nature of the crime and the court proceedings, these details were deeply distressing, but the publication had not added any commentary or observations which made the presentation of this information insensitive. There was no breach of the Code.

Accuracy (Clause 1)

Many complaints relating to reports of deaths and inquests are made under Clause 1. Inaccurate reports can be particularly distressing for people at a time of grief.

Social media

Social media can be a source of information about deaths or incidents involving people, as well as providing a means to contact family members about an incident. Care should be taken in relation to the publication of information taken from social media which reports on a person's involvement in a life-threatening incident.

News of major incidents has been followed by the creation of hoax social media or fundraising accounts, pretending to identify individuals caught up in the incident as in the case of **Gorman v Daily Star** opposite.

Journalists should be wary of sources on social media carrying this information and verify the source of information before publishing.

Gorman v Daily Star

The Daily Star published a photo gallery of people missing or dead following the terror attack in Manchester Arena. One of the photographs was of the complainant's daughter, accompanied with the caption: "MISSING: Lucy Cross". The complainant's daughter, who is not called Lucy Cross, was not missing and had been at home at the time of the attack. The newspaper had relied on agency copy which was based on a Twitter account, and had taken no further steps to establish the accuracy of the claims on Twitter. It said that at the time of publication, it had no reason to believe that the information was false. Given the nature of the claim, greater care should have been taken.

This represented a failure to take care over the accuracy of the article, in breach of Clause 1. The Committee noted favourably that in the following day's edition, the newspaper had published a front-page reference to an apology on page 2. The complaint was also upheld under Clause 2 (Privacy) and Clause 6 (Children).

Any enquiries made via social media to families of deceased people must be made with sympathy and discretion under the terms of Clause 4. In the complaint **A woman v hertfordshiremercury.co.uk** the complainant complained under Clause 4 in relation to a tweet published by a journalist.

Questions relating to accuracy

- How reliable is the information you are using, particularly if this comes from social media? What steps have you taken to verify the information?
- Are you taking care to present unverified information about what has happened as claims and not fact?
- If you have published information which is later found to be inaccurate, how will you make readers aware of the correct position?

[A woman v hertfordshiremercury.co.uk](#)

In the complaint relating to a court report about a man who had been found guilty of multiple offences, including counts of sexual abuse, the journalist who had reported on the court case posted a tweet after the article was published, which was a public comment on the experience of reporting on a court case. The complainant believed that this was insensitive in tone and intruded into the shock of the family of the victim.

The Committee concluded that the tweet did not constitute an approach or enquiry of the newspaper, so Clause 4 was not engaged. Nonetheless, the Committee took this opportunity to draw attention to the importance of observing the terms of Clause 4 not only in what is published, but also in the reporting process.

Cause of death and inquests

Journalists should exercise caution when speculating on the cause of an individual's death. Speculating on these matters could be insensitive, particularly in cases where allegations are made about the deceased or the manner of their death.

Inquests

There is a public interest in the reporting of inquests, which are themselves public events. The media are entitled to report on proceedings in an open and transparent way. In Scotland, Fatal Accident Inquiries, which are held in the case of a sudden or unexpected death, are also public and can be attended by journalists. The Code makes clear that the requirement to handle publication sensitively should not restrict the right to report legal proceedings.

In reporting an inquest, a journalist may clear up any rumours or suspicion about the death. They may also draw attention to circumstances which may lead to further deaths or injuries if no preventative action is taken.

Journalists are entitled to report the fact of a person's death, even if surviving family members would prefer for there to be no reporting and regard the death as private. Relatives of a deceased person may dispute an inquest report and the cause of death, particularly if they did not attend in person. Therefore, it is important to keep contemporaneous notes of inquest proceedings which can be referred to later.

One such inquest report in which the journalist had kept accurate notes was [Laws v Daily Star](#), which was not found to breach the Code and is included overleaf.

Questions relating to cause of death and inquests

- How will you approach the family at an inquest?
- Have you considered the effect of your behaviour on the family of the deceased?

Laws v Daily Star

A woman complained about an article which reported on the inquest into the death of her father. The headline stated that the complainant's father had been, "Killed by a Yorkshire pud" and the first line said that he "choked to death on a Yorkshire pudding". She said that this was inaccurate as Yorkshire puddings were not mentioned during the inquest. She said that this detail had made the story more sensational which constituted mocking her father and the way that he died.

The publication had provided notes taken during the inquest that indicated that the complainant's father had choked whilst eating several items of food, one of which was a Yorkshire pudding, therefore, it was not misleading. The Committee acknowledged that the complainant had been distressed by the reporting, however, it did not consider that the headline, or the article itself, had been insensitive.

Reporting of suicide

There is a significant public interest in the reporting of suicide as it remains a serious public health concern. IPSO is regularly contacted by editors and journalists seeking advice on how the Editors' Code of Practice applies to the reporting of suicide, and [has produced guidance on this subject](#) which includes information on excessive details and novel methods.

Other matters

Syndication

Members of the public are often not aware that articles may be syndicated to publications within the same publishing group, or that articles may be re-published by separate publishers. This can be particularly distressing when it concerns articles which may intrude into their grief or shock.

In the complaint [Louise Hough v walesonline.co.uk](#), the complainant was concerned about the syndication of the article both outside the newspaper's publishing group and sharing within the group. Whilst the Committee acknowledged the complainant's concerns, these were not issues which in themselves fell within the Code and therefore not something on which the Committee could make a ruling.

More resources for journalists

IPSO has produced the following pieces of guidance which may be useful when reporting on deaths and inquests:

- [IPSO guidance on reporting major incidents](#)
- [IPSO guidance on reporting suicide.](#)

More resources for the public

You may also find it useful to refer to the following information which has been produced for the public:

- [IPSO information for the public on reporting deaths and inquests](#)
- [IPSO information for the public on reporting major incidents](#)