

Reporting on Suicide

Guidance for journalists and editors

Key Points

- Research shows that media portrayals of suicide can influence suicidal behaviour and lead to imitative acts, particularly among vulnerable groups or young people.
- Publishing excessive details about a suicide may lead to simulative acts.
- Take particular care when reporting on novel methods, to prevent attention being drawn to a relatively unusual method of suicide.
- As inquests are held in public, the information revealed during proceedings is already in the public domain, and is not private to the family of the deceased.
- When reporting on inquests and other legal proceedings, the publication's role is to give an accurate account of the evidence given.
- IPSO can provide non-binding, 24-hour pre-publication advice on the Editors' Code of Practice if there are any concerns about articles prior to publication.

About this guidance

There is a significant public interest in the reporting of suicide as it remains a significant public health concern. It is the leading cause of death in people under the age of 35 in the UK.

This guidance explains how the Editors' Code applies to the reporting of suicide, focusing closely on the issue of restricting the reporting of unnecessary details of suicide methods (particularly new and emerging methods), and the importance of reporting inquests accurately and sensitively.

The purpose of this guidance is to communicate clearly about the requirements of the Code. Given the sensitivity of this topic, information in relation to suicide methods is covered in brief terms.

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 5 (Reporting suicide) as well as Clause 4 (Intrusion into grief or shock) and Clause 1 (Accuracy).

Content warning

This document contains multiple case studies involving stories relating to suicide and associated details.

The importance of reporting suicide - and the risks

The reporting of suicide is covered by the Code's rules on intrusion into grief or shock, stressing the need for sympathy, discretion and sensitivity in publication. Both Clause 4 (Intrusion into grief or shock) and Clause 5 (Reporting suicide) make clear that newspapers have the right to report on legal proceedings (such as inquests). Journalists should also be aware that a failure to take care when reporting suicide can put vulnerable people at serious risk of harm.

The death of an individual is a matter of public record, and a death may affect a community as well as those who knew the individual personally. Journalists have a basic right 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.

There is a public interest in the reporting of inquests, which are in any case public events. In reporting an inquest, a journalist may clear up any rumours or suspicion about the death. They may also draw attention to circumstances that may lead to

further deaths or injuries if no preventative action is taken.

Research evidence

A wide body of research from around the world shows that media portrayals of suicide, including information published by newspapers and magazines, can influence suicidal behaviour and lead to imitative acts, particularly among vulnerable groups or young people. The research shows that overly detailed reporting does not just influence the choice of method of a suicide but can lead to additional deaths which would otherwise not have occurred. Some of these studies are included at the end of this document on page 14.

Clause 5 (Reporting suicide)

The reporting of suicide is covered in the Editors' Code under Clause 5. The purpose of this clause is to prevent the publication of material which might lead to imitative acts, balanced with the media's right to report on legal proceedings, including inquests.

Publications are required to make difficult judgements as to which details heard during inquest proceedings they will publish. Whether particular details are excessive will depend on the circumstances of each case.

What is meant by excessive detail?

To decide if a detail is excessive, you should consider whether it is necessary to explain the events you are reporting. Sometimes there may be specific justification for including detail about the method, for example, because it is central to the coroner's conclusion on the cause of a death; in those instances, this detail may not be "excessive".

It is not possible to quantify from research the level of risk posed by individual details, so editors –

and ultimately IPSO's Complaints Committee – must make a judgement about what is excessive in a particular context.

Some potentially excessive details could include:

- the ligature or point of suspension in a death by hanging; (see for example [Jones v The Forester](#) to the right) or
- the quantity of pills taken in the case of an overdose; or
- the steps taken to administer a poison or toxic substance to an individual; (for example, see [Dayman v Northampton Chronicle & Echo](#) below) or
- the specific location (for example, see [Young v Teesside Live](#)).

Journalists should take great care in selecting what details to include and should be prepared to explain their decision. Take care with information like texts, videos, or photo captions. Any editorial decisions about how to present the reporting of suicide should be shared with all relevant staff, to ensure a uniform approach.

You may find it helpful to adopt the following three step process to ensure compliance with the Code:

1. Identify any information within the article about the method of suicide which needs to be assessed against the Code.
2. Analyse whether the details you plan to include are excessive, considering the context in which the suicide took place – what is the rationale for publishing this information?
3. Consider how the information will be published (particularly if publishing online).

The Forester reported on an inquest into a man's death and included excessive details within the article. The complaint was upheld under Clause 5.

Jones v The Forester

An inquest report in The Forester specified the ligature which a man had used to end his life by hanging. The item used as a ligature was readily available in the home. The newspaper had argued that there was a public interest in reporting the circumstances surrounding the man's death, to address rumours which had been present within the community.

The Committee recognised that there is a public interest in newspapers reporting on inquest proceedings. However, the publication of the ligature which had been used was excessive and presented the possibility that it might lead to simulative acts. The complaint was therefore upheld as a breach of Clause 5.

Novel and emerging methods of suicide

Novel methods of suicide are those which have not been seen before and which could inspire simulative acts. You should take particular care when reporting on novel methods, to prevent attention being drawn to a relatively unusual method of suicide, as there is a risk of increasing the awareness of this method among the population.

In 2018, two newspapers (Northampton Chronicle & Echo and the Gloucestershire Echo) reported on the death of a woman who died as a result of an overdose. The articles included slightly different details about a relatively unknown method of suicide. One complaint was upheld under Clause 5, while the other was not.

In 2020, a complaint about a report in the bucksfreepress.co.uk (see next page) about an emerging method of suicide, which did not contain details which might encourage simulative acts, was not upheld.

Dayman v Northampton Chronicle & Echo and Dayman v Gloucestershire Echo

Two newspapers identified a substance ingested by a woman, and stated that ingesting a high level of the substance can be fatal. The Northampton Chronicle and Echo also included details of the amount of the substance used, what it was mixed with and the amount of the substance which constituted a lethal dose. The Committee upheld the complaint against the Northampton Chronicle and Echo, ruling that the details published were excessive as they were sufficient to support an individual in engaging in a simulative act. The Committee noted that it was reassured by the publication's response to the complaint and the steps it had taken, which indicated that it appreciated the severity of the breach of the Code in this instance.

The excessive details were not published in the Gloucestershire Echo article, and this complaint was not upheld.

Coates v bucksfreepress.co.uk

An inquest report in the bucksfreepress.co.uk reported how a man had taken his own life. The article reported that the coroner found that the man had died after having “ingested a toxic substance” and gave the chemical name of this substance. The complainant was concerned that by reporting the name of the substance, the article included excessive detail of an “emerging” method of suicide and could lead to simulative acts.

The publication said that it had taken steps to avoid including excessive detail, for example, by not including the quantity or the concentration of the substance. It also said that where the cause of death was officially registered as [named substance] toxicity, it was necessary to name this substance in order to accurately record the cause of death. While the Committee understood the complainant’s concern, it did not consider that the article contained “excessive detail”, such as the amount of substance required, the preparation of the substance, and how the substance could be obtained or administered. There was no breach of Clause 5.

Media interest in railway suicides is commonplace because they take place in public and may disrupt rail services. Responsible coverage of these events requires striking a balance between reporting relevant information about a tragic incident that will be of concern to readers, and avoiding gratuitous details of the method. These will vary based on the context, but particular scrutiny should be given to information about the timings, precise location and access points to the railway.

Key questions

1. What details are you going to include in your report about the death?
2. Do any details relate to the method of suicide?
3. Is the method of suicide you are reporting on novel?
4. What is your justification for including those details?

Clause 4 (Intrusion into grief or shock)

Clause 4 requires that publication is handled sensitively in cases involving grief or shock and that enquiries and approaches are made with sympathy and discretion. Although reporting on the death of family members can be very upsetting to family and friends, deaths affect whole communities and the obligation to handle publication sensitively does not restrict the right to report on them.

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.

You may also be interested to read IPSO's [guidance on reporting deaths and inquests](#).

Inquests

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, inquests are held into sudden or unnatural deaths, for example from suicide. Reporting on an inquest is a form of court reporting, which is in the public

interest. Clause 4 (Intrusion into grief or shock) explicitly states that its provisions “should not restrict the right to report legal proceedings,” as does Clause 5 (Reporting Suicide). As inquests are held in public, the information revealed during proceedings is already in the public domain, and is not private to the family of the deceased.

You do not need to seek permission from the complainant or their family to publish a report of an inquest, as the complaint of [Lewis v essexlive.news](#) below demonstrates.

Lewis v essexlive.news

A man complained that a report of an inquest involving a young girl who took her own life was inaccurate, and that his family was given no prior warning that it was going to be published. He also considered a reference to the cause of death to be unnecessary and insensitive in breach of Clause 4. The publication maintained that the article was an accurate report of information given at the inquest, and supplied the reporter's notes which confirmed the details included in the article.

While the Committee understood that it was upsetting for the complainant to read the article, the publication was entitled to report on the information heard at the inquest, and it did not need to seek permission to publish it. The Committee did not consider the article reported the child's death in a way that was insensitive. It reflected the legal record of the cause of death. There was no breach of Clause 4.

Photos

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 may be helpful to approach the family of those who died, to see if there is a particular photo that they would prefer. Suicide prevention organisations advise against using dramatic or sensational pictures which could glamorise a death.

Key questions

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

Clause 1 (Accuracy)

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

When reporting on inquests and other legal proceedings, the publication's role is to give an accurate account of the evidence. Relatives of a deceased person may dispute an inquest report and details given about their relative, 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.

The Didcot Herald and Oxford Mail both reported on an inquest into the suicide of a teenage boy. A complaint was upheld under Clause 1. Inaccurately reporting the circumstances of a person's death and the possible contributing medical causes constituted a significant inaccuracy and required correction. The complaints were not upheld under Clause 4 as the articles were inquest reports, were not insensitive or gratuitous, and did not go beyond what was heard at proceedings.

Storey v The Herald (Didcot) and Storey v Oxford Mail

Two newspapers reported on the opening of the inquest into the death of a 13-year-old child. The articles included a quotation from the coroner which said that the child had a "previously well-known mental health history."

The mother of the child said this was inaccurate. While not present at the inquest, she said her child had no mental health issues. During IPSO's investigation, the complainant said that the coroner had confirmed that he had in fact said that her son had "no known mental health history" and provided a recording of the proceedings to show this. The publication accepted that the reporter had misheard what the coroner had said and published a correction.

The correction made clear that the statement was inaccurate and the continuation on page two apologised for the mistake and the distress caused.

Online crazes

Widespread social media use has brought with it concerns about circulation of material which may encourage vulnerable groups to consider self-harm or suicide. There have been a number of examples of online crazes which appear to encourage vulnerable groups, particularly children and young people, to undertake increasingly risky challenges which have been linked to suicide and self-harm.

To date there has been no officially confirmed evidence linking specific challenges to suicidal and self-harming behaviour in the UK. There is a public interest in reporting on these challenges. It can raise awareness, signpost parents and carers to support and hold public authorities to account. Under Clause 1 (Accuracy), publications are entitled to report claims and speculation about these challenges but should take care to present them as such. Journalists should consider the source of these claims, the credibility of that source and whether the information can be verified from another source,

before deciding on whether and how they will report these claims.

In the complaint of [Wallis v thesun.co.uk](https://www.thesun.co.uk), the publication was entitled to report on concerns the “craze” had played a role in the deaths of children.

[Wallis v thesun.co.uk](https://www.thesun.co.uk)

A man complained about an article which reported fears over the emergence of an online “monster” that allegedly targeted young children via online videos.

It said that the image had even been linked to several child suicides around the world. The complainant said that this claim had been revealed as a hoax. The publication said that the article did not report as fact that there was a link between the character and the deaths. Instead, it was simply reporting the links made by the police or in other publications, and took care to attribute these as required.

There was no breach of Clause 1.

Additional matters

The Editors' Code of Practice focuses on preventing the publication of excessive detail of a method of suicide. Separate to this, there are other issues that journalists should be aware of when reporting on suicide. These issues do not engage with the Code but are relevant to the reporting of suicide.

Language

Journalists should be aware that the Suicide Act 1961 decriminalised the act of suicide. Many organisations working in the area of suicide prevention are concerned about the use of the phrase "commit suicide" and argue that the phrasing stigmatises suicide and is insensitive to those affected by suicide. They prefer to refer to a person's decision to take "their own life", or that they "died by suicide". Suicide prevention charities also advise journalists to limit language that sensationalises or glorifies suicide.

Positive stories

Research shows that stories about people coming through difficult times can have a positive effect

and encourage vulnerable people to seek help. See page 14 for more information.

Signposting

The coverage of suicide can be distressing to readers. Editors may find it helpful to signpost people reading these articles to sources of support by including the contact details for relevant organisations in any articles reporting on a suicide. This can encourage people who are struggling and may be experiencing suicidal thoughts to seek help.

Romanticising suicide

Journalists should consider carefully whether to publish comments which romanticise suicidal behaviour, or which might suggest that suicide is a way of responding to the difficulties that people might be experiencing. The deaths of young people in particular affect a wider community and can often lead to an outpouring of grief, which journalists may want to report. But journalists should be aware that young people, particularly those affected by suicide, are

at increased risk of suicidal behaviour. They are particularly vulnerable to suicide contagion through media coverage including following the suicide of a celebrity.

Reporting clusters of suicides

The coverage of clusters of suicides is a particularly challenging area for journalists. There is a public interest in the reporting of clusters of suicides and, in doing so, holding public authorities to account for taking steps to prevent suicides. However, the reporting of clusters of suicides can draw attention to the number of deaths, risks sensationalising the deaths and can lead to an increase in imitative behaviour. Journalists should consider how they present the reporting of clusters, to prevent imitative behaviour; it may be helpful to avoid terminology or presentation that focuses heavily on the number or frequency of deaths as this could have the unintended effect of “promoting” the cluster.

Further resources

Links to research

The following list includes examples of studies which demonstrates how overly detailed reporting about methods of suicide can lead to an increase in the number of deaths, while restricting the amount of detail can lead to a reduction in deaths.

- Researchers in Taiwan found that increases in the reporting of suicides involving charcoal were associated with increases in the incidence of suicides using the same method on the following day, with each reported news item being associated with a 16% increase in next day suicides.
- In Vienna, rates of suicide on the subway system decreased significantly after the imposition of new media guidelines which included restricting the amount of detail given about the method of suicide.
- Researchers in America looking into the rates of suicide following the death of Robin Williams noted a rapid increase in suicides, specifically suffocation suicides, in the five

months following his death. The researchers make clear that it is uncertain whether his death led to the increased number of suicides – but there did appear to be a connection between the events.

- A growing body of evidence shows that interviews with people who have overcome a crisis can help vulnerable people by encouraging them to seek help and reducing the stigma around the subject.

More resources for journalists

IPSO has produced the following guidance which may be useful when reporting on suicide:

- [IPSO Guidance on reporting deaths and inquests](#)

We can provide non-binding, 24-hour pre-publication advice on the Editors Code if there are any concerns about articles prior to publication.

During office hours, please call 0300 123 2220. Out of hours, where necessary, a Complaints Officer on duty can be contacted via 07799 903 929.

Further resources continued

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

as well as working to make suicide prevention a priority for parliamentarians and policy-makers.

They publish their own guidelines on reporting suicides for the media and provide an advice service for journalists.

Media guidelines: <https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/media-guidelines/>

External resources

The following organisations have media guidelines for journalists which may be useful. Please note that these are not endorsed by IPSO:

[The Suicide Reporting Toolkit](#) is a practical resource for journalists and journalism educators to assist in reporting suicide responsibly. It embeds global media reporting guidelines on suicide within journalism practice.

[PAPYRUS Prevention of Young Suicide](#) is a national charity dedicated to the prevention of young suicide.

Media guidelines: <https://www.papyrus-uk.org/guidelines-for-journalists/>

[Samaritans](#) is a national charity that provides 24/7 support for those at risk of suicide,