

A woman v OK! Magazine

Clauses noted: 3

A woman complained to the Press Complaints Commission through Swan Turton solicitors that an article published in OK! Magazine was intrusive in breach of Clause 3 (Privacy) of the Code of Practice.

The complaint was upheld.

The article was about a male celebrity, and it mentioned that he and a friend – the complainant – were ‘spotted at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting’. A caption to a photograph of the pair repeated that they had attended an AA meeting.

The complainant’s solicitor said the article breached the Code in two respects. It disclosed the fact of the complainant’s addiction and treatment – which had never been previously revealed in the media – and it included an intrusive photograph of the complainant outside the meeting. The solicitor was also concerned that the magazine had previously failed to respond directly to a letter from him on this issue.

The magazine argued that the complainant was not the focus of the article, and said that the piece had only stated that she had accompanied her friend to the AA meeting. There were no specific details about her treatment, and a reader might conclude that she was simply attending the meeting to provide moral support to her friend. It apologised to the complainant if she had been adversely affected by publication, and undertook not to republish the material under complaint.

Adjudication

It was clear that the magazine had published private information about the complainant. Taken together, the photograph, its caption, and the information in the article constituted intrusive material about her attendance at an AA meeting. The fact of her treatment was not in the public domain, and there was no public interest reason for publishing references to it without her consent.

The defence advanced by the magazine – that there was no breach of the Code because readers might think the complainant was at the meeting only to provide moral support – was clearly without merit. The fact was that the magazine had stated that she had attended the meeting and published a photograph of her outside it. It did not know whether she had been there for treatment herself, and took no care in its presentation of the material to avoid a possible intrusion into her privacy. This was reckless in the circumstances, as shown by the subsequent revelation that she had indeed been at the clinic for treatment. It was also regrettable that the magazine had not engaged with the complainant’s solicitor when a complaint was made directly to the publication.

Adjudication issued 15/12/2007