

Ambulance

TOMORROW

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WELSH AMBULANCE SERVICE CONTINUES ITS JOURNEY OF IMPROVEMENT

After a recent major performance Review, CEO, Alan Murray and Chairman, Stuart Fletcher, explains how their Service is working to meet the targets set two years ago

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Getting Press Coverage Right



For paramedics whose day-to-day work involves dealing with the aftermath of accidents, the ability to cope with distressing, often graphic, injuries is important. But what about the manner in which images of accidents are presented to the public at large?

The Press Complaints Commission's Communications Officer, Catherine Speller, here discusses a complaint recently made to the PCC which should be of particular interest to Ambulance Public Relations Officers.

A photograph of an elderly woman receiving medical treatment at the scene of a car crash and published in a local newspaper was recently the subject of a complaint to the Press Complaints Commission, the independent regulator of the newspaper and magazine industry. The case illustrates the important balance the press has to strike between the right to report on serious road accidents (which take place in public and occasionally have far-reaching consequences) and the need to handle publication sensitively and respect the privacy of those involved.

The Wiltshire Gazette and Herald had published an article about the crash on its website, followed by an article in the newspaper. The online report – which was published shortly after the accident – included a photograph of the victim being treated by the emergency services, which the complainant, the woman's son-in-law, considered to be extremely graphic. The complainant said that the article had been published when not all members of the family had been informed of the accident or known the extent of the injuries. Given that the article had (incorrectly) stated that police officers "fear for her life", the newspaper's reporting of what it understood to be a potentially fatal accident was intrusive and insensitive. While the photograph which appeared in the newspaper the following day had obscured the victim's face, the complainant maintained that it was intrusive nonetheless.

In its defence, the newspaper said that the accident had occurred in the daytime on a public road and caused long tailbacks. The images had been removed from its website

as soon as a complaint from the family was received from the family via the local police force, even though this was out-of-hours. The newspaper also carried a critical letter from the complainant in its next edition and sent a private letter of apology to the family.

Who was right in this instance?

The starting point for the PCC when considering any complaint is to assess it against the Code of Practice, which set out guidelines for the industry covering how news is gathered and reported. In this case, the complaint was made under several clauses, including clause 3 (Privacy) and 5 (Intrusion into grief or shock).

The photographs certainly raised concerns for the Commission. While the victim's features may not have been entirely recognisable, and she was not named, the make of her car and the number plate were clear in the photographs in both the online and print editions. There was clearly a risk that the photographs would effectively have identified the woman as a crash victim to those who knew her. The Commission was particularly concerned about the publication of the online image, which showed the complainant's facial features as she received treatment. This had been uploaded before the condition of the victim had been established and at a time when family members may not have been informed or would have been in a state of shock.

In its adjudication, the Commission stated:

"There is a clear need for newspapers to exercise caution when publishing images that relate to a person's health and medical treatment, even if they are taken in public places. Rare and large-scale events such as terrorist attacks and natural disasters involve a degree of public interest so great that it may be proportionate and appropriate to show

images of their aftermath without the consent of those involved.

On this occasion, however, the Commission considered that there was insufficient public interest in a more routine incident such as a car crash to override the rights to privacy of the victim by publishing a picture of her face and showing her receiving treatment, especially at a time when her condition was uncertain. The online publication of the image, therefore, raised a breach of the Code".

Nonetheless, the Commission had to have regard for the response of the newspaper. It had apologised, promptly withdrawn the offending photograph from the website, published the family's criticisms of the paper and published an apology. Given the relatively brief period that the picture had been available online, this action was a proportionate and necessary remedy to the complaint under Clauses 3 and 5 of the Code. Had the newspaper failed to take such action, the Commission would have upheld this aspect of the complaint.

The Commission did not consider that the photograph that appeared in the published version of the paper raised a similar breach of the Code. The complainant's features were entirely obscured and she was therefore not seen specifically receiving treatment. The Commission appreciated the family's concern at any use of a picture of the crash scene, but in terms of the Code it considered that the photograph in the newspaper was just on the right side of the line.

Feelings can run high among those personally affected by cases such as this, and the Commission appreciated the family's strength of feeling about the publication of the articles. In the end, though, the Commission took the view that the remedial action taken by the editor to remedy the complaint – as set out above – was sufficient to constitute a proportionate and adequate response to the complaint.

Since the PCC's inception in 1991, the PCC has always taken care to treat each complaint that is brought to it on an individual basis. While patterns do often emerge in the nature of the complaints, each complaint has its own set of very specific circumstances and is therefore dealt with carefully, on an individual basis.

PRESS COMPLAINTS COMMISSION

Full details of this case – and further information about the Press Complaints Commission – is available on the PCC website: www.pcc.org.uk/cases/adjudicated.

Ambulance Press Officers who would like to discuss issues raised by this article or who have general questions about the PCC can contact Catherine Speller on catherine.speller@pcc.org.uk.