

PRESS COMPLAINTS COMMISSION

From the Chairman

Ms Madeleine Moon MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

21st October 2008

Madeleine,

As agreed at our meeting on Wednesday, I am writing to set out all the PCC has been doing in regard to the issue of the reporting of suicide.

You will recall that, in June this year, we circulated two messages from affected families in Bridgend, making clear that they did not wish to be contacted by the (broadcast or print) press and that they were distressed by the republication of photographs of their loved ones. We have distributed our contact details in the area (including Stephen Abell's mobile phone number) and have not been informed of any repeat problems. Our desist request was recirculated last week by South Wales Police, in advance of an inquest into one of the deaths. No complaint has followed this.

We have also resolved complaints from several of the families in the Bridgend area, who contacted us with concerns about specific newspapers. The newspapers have generally sent private letters of apology and removed articles from their websites, as requested by complainants. There is one complaint unresolved, but the complainant has not corresponded with us for some time. It may be that she (understandably) does not wish to be reminded of the matter further. The newspaper has already acted to resolve her complaint, and – while we have temporarily closed the file – she can come back to us at any time if she wishes.

The Commission will shortly consider your complaints against the Daily Express and Sunday Times. This may well provide the Commission with an opportunity to set out some more general thoughts on the type of

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Sir Christopher Meyer

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reporting we have seen. William Gore will correspond with you separately on these complaints.

At our meeting, you referred to an outstanding complaint against the Daily Telegraph. I have now looked into this. We did indeed write to the Daily Telegraph following your initial concern about the quotation. We did so to see whether there was anything substantive we might need to take forward formally. We were informed that the newspaper had taken the quote (the accuracy of which was not in dispute) from Reuters at the end of January, but accepted that it had erred in attributing it to you "last night". While we thought it right to make the newspaper aware of this error, we did not consider that the point was so significant as to require a formal investigation. If you disagree with that judgement, do let me know right away and it can be looked at again. And if you feel there is any other issue outstanding on which we have not come back to you, please say so.

You have now also provided articles about the tragic case of I do understand the point you have made. However, the difficulty may be that the entire method of suicide on this occasion is encapsulated by the briefest of descriptions and that the newspapers have really done no more than report the bald fact that she It is not clear what extraneous detail was included in the articles further to this or what could have been reasonably removed in a way that still would allow the story to be told.

That is my initial reaction to this case. Perhaps you might let me know your further thoughts, and whether you would like the matter to be more formally considered.

In November, the Code Committee is set to meet to discuss the issue of suicide reporting, in light of all of our experiences over the year. I understand that they will approve the extensive revision of the Editors' Codebook, a publication that fills out the specific meaning of each clause of the Code by drawing together relevant PCC case law. This will include a new section on Clause 5 (ii), making clear the rulings the PCC has made and setting out more information on what "excessive detail" means. This will also form best practice guidance on the issue of suicide reporting for the future.

I enclose a copy of our most recent ruling, which we discussed at our meeting: *Choose Life v Daily Sport*. The complainant issued a statement after the decision, saying rightly that "this adjudication underlines the



PCC's resolve to take action on irresponsible reporting of suicide and is a huge step forward".

I would also emphasise that a complaint under Clause 5 (ii) can come from any concerned party. It is a matter for any reader to suggest that excessive detail has been included. I enclose a summary of a resolved complaint, which came from a reader about an article written by the sister of the person who took his own life.

You will be aware that we have been working closely with the Samaritans: taking up speaking engagements at their recent conferences in Glasgow and York and offering support for their recently re-launched media guidelines. We hope this close relationship will develop further. We have also had discussions with Papyrus and Cruse and Shift.

We are planning to hold a seminar on the issue of suicide reporting later this year, to which the Samaritans are contributing. It will be organised in conjunction with the LSE-based think tank, Polis, and will be targeted at journalists, academics and others. The date, I am afraid, has been confirmed as December 1st. I am sorry if that will prevent you from attending. Your perspective will be much missed.

As you know, we will also be attending your All Party Group in November, where we can continue to update you with our actions. We at the PCC value all your input, and hope we can continue working closely together to raise standards in this area.

With kind regards.

Your etc,



Sir Christopher Meyer

