



**AUSTRALIAN
PRESS
COUNCIL**

SUBMISSION

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Submission from the Australian Press Council to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee on its Inquiry into Suicide in Australia.

Introduction

The Australian Press Council is the independent self-regulatory body of the Australian print media. From time to time it has to deal with complaints about the reporting of suicide as an ethical issue that may breach its Statement of principles. As a body that seeks to preserve the traditional freedom of the press to report on matters of public interest and concern, it has also had to deal with calls for restrictions on the press' ability to report suicides or on the issues related to self-harm incidents.

It makes this brief submission to the committee to draw it attention to the generally responsible way in which the Australian press has reported suicide and the necessity of ensuring that the press is not unduly restricted in its ability to report on matters of public interest and concern.

Reporting of suicide

At the time of the establishment of the Press Council in 1976, the Australian press tended not to report suicide, whether the story related to a particular self-harm incident or to a coronial inquiry into such an incident. In order to avoid references to suicide, the press employed in such reports some circumlocutions that persist to this day, for example, "the police say that there were no suspicious circumstances". In its first fifteen years, the Council was called upon to adjudicate only two complaints arising from reports of self-harm incidents.

In the 1990s, in the wake of Aboriginal deaths in custody (often attributed to self-harm incidents) and to the increasing incidence of suicide, particularly of youth suicide, in Australia, there were calls for the greater reporting of suicide as a social phenomenon.

As a result of these developments, and a particular case where the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists brought a complaint to the Council about a report of a suicide published in *The Age* in 1994, the Council issued its first guideline on the reporting of suicide (Guideline 189, November 1994).

In 1996 the Council convened a meeting between mental health experts, community organisations and journalists and editors to discuss the issues arising from the increased reporting of suicide. This led to the publication of a transcript of that meeting and, indirectly, to the establishment by the government in 1997 of the National Media and Mental Health Group, which has developed further guidelines for the media on the reporting of mental health issues generally, and suicide in particular.

In July 2001, following consideration of further complaints, the Council updated its guideline on reporting of suicide and republished it as part of Guideline 246, and that guideline is appended for the Committee's guidance (Attachment A). It calls for responsible reporting of such matters, when they need to be reported at all, but notes that where there are legitimate issues of public interest and concern, responsible reporting of such matters is called for. These issues would include reports dealing with suicide prevention, preventable clusters of self-harm incidents, the activities of the community groups working in the area, the treatment of mental illness, the causes of depression, lack of government funding and so on.

Based on complaints with which it has dealt, the Council believes that the Australian print media has been responsible in its reporting of suicide since the release of Guideline 189. It can see no justification for any call to change the current situation with regard to the print media.

A causal link?

Based on its research, the Council does not subscribe to the hypothesis that the reporting of suicide, particularly youth suicide, is *ipso facto* bad and is itself a causal factor in subsequent suicides. The evidence appears to support the proposition that local contagion, through personal knowledge, is far more likely to lead to clusters, than the reporting of self-harm incidents in the general press. In fact, there are good reasons to assert that reporting can in fact have an ameliorative effect.

The Council notes some particular cases that seem to contradict the assertion that reporting of suicide-related matters is bad and to be avoided. The reporting in 1991-2 by the Brisbane *Sunday Mail* of the incidence of suicides from the Gateway Bridge led directly to steps being taken that reduced the use of that structure for suicide. In August 1992 the *Sunday Herald Sun* reported on an alarming cluster of suicides in Kyneton. The township became the centre of media attention and, as a result of the newspaper coverage, a public meeting was held to discuss the issue. Rather than leading to further suicides, the report seems to have had an ameliorative effect as demonstrated by a follow-up report in February 1994. A cluster of suicides in Bundanoon, a NSW provincial town, seemed to be linked by the common friendship among a group of men of various ages. The reporting in of these incidents (24 September and 27 September 1997) appears to have ended the cycle of suicide in Bundanoon. The press reporting of a suicide cluster in Geelong this year appears also to have led to action that has improved the situation in that regional city.

Mental health experts agree that appropriate reporting can lead to improved "mental health literacy" and to the promotion of mental health services. A 1990s recent Federal government report called for greater, not less, reporting of suicide-related stories. The assertions made by Dr Brendan Nelson, the chair of the reporting group, were that youth health and education services need to be more aware of the suicide problem and, implicitly, that such issues need to be aired publicly.

Conclusion

In the Press Council's view, the current self-regulatory guidelines are sufficient to govern the responsible reporting of suicide in the press and the Senate committee does not need to take any steps to further restrict the ability of the press to report on matters of public interest and concern.

Attachment A

General Press Release No. 246 (July 2001)

The Australian Press Council has reviewed a number of its reporting guidelines, some of them now decade or more old, and re-issued them in an amended form.

The attached are intended as general guidelines for the print media on the ways in which newspapers and magazines should approach these matters.

Reporting of Suicide

(in place of General Press Release 189)

The Press Council is in sympathy with attempts by governmental and other bodies to curb the rate of suicide in Australia, particularly amongst young people. It calls upon the press to continue exercising care and responsibility in reporting matters of suicide and mental illness.

The Council notes that relatively little Australian research has been conducted on suicide. Most reviews reported so far are based on overseas experience, but the findings are inconclusive.

Some researchers claim that an association exists between media portrayal of suicide and actual suicide, and that in some cases the link is causal. Others, on the other hand, suggest that increased reporting of suicide can act as a deterrent to people at risk, and can draw attention to the social problems that may lead to the contemplation of suicide.

The Council believes that most papers are aware of the desirability of treating suicide with restraint, and of avoiding:

- Adding to the pain of relatives and friends of the deceased;
- Any reporting which might encourage copy-cat suicides or self harm;
- Unnecessary reference to details of method or place of a suicide;
- Language or presentation which trivialises, romanticises, or glorifies suicide, particularly in papers which target a youth readership;
- Loose or slang use of terms to describe various forms of mental illness, and the risk of stigmatising vulnerable people that may accompany such labels.

The Council also strongly commends to editors the suggestion that articles dealing with suicide, when they are deemed necessary, should include reference to the counselling services available to people in emotional distress and to their families, with contact addresses and phone numbers.

The Council recognises there are exceptions where these desirable aims may be outweighed by the pressure of news and public interest.

Suicides are generally not reported in newspapers, but mass suicides, suicides by public figures, bizarre cases, the continuing debate around voluntary euthanasia, research and statistical analysis, and other aspects of suicide and mental illness are all legitimate matters of public interest and concern.

Precise rules or guidelines, as advocated by some groups, cannot take adequate account of such exceptions. Instead, the Press Council prefers to encourage responsible approaches in the industry to the reporting of suicide and mental illness, and consultation with reputable associations, research centres, counselling services and health authorities when seeking comment for articles on these issues.

Attachment B

The Australian Press Council

The Australian Press Council is a voluntary association of organisations and persons established on 22 July 1976. The membership of the Council is set out in the attachment.

The objects of the Australian Press Council are to promote freedom of speech through responsible and independent print media, and adherence to high journalistic and editorial standards, by:

- considering and dealing with complaints and concerns about material in newspapers, magazines and journals, published either in print or on the Internet;
- encouraging and supporting initiatives by the print media to address the causes for readers' complaints and concerns;
- keeping under review, and where appropriate, challenging political, legislative, commercial or other developments which may adversely affect the dissemination of information of public interest, and may consequently threaten the public's right to know;
- making representations to governments, public inquiries and other forums as appropriate on matters concerning freedom of speech and access to information;
- undertaking research and consultation on developments in public policy affecting freedom of speech, and promoting public awareness of such issues;
- promoting an understanding of the Objects, Principles and workings of the Council especially among editors, journalists and journalism schools, through forums and consultations; and encouraging feedback for Council's consideration.

The Australian Press Council
Members
November 2009

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Professor Ken McKinnon

Industry Members (5)

Phil McLean (Fairfax Media) – Mark Baker (The Age) is his alternate

Campbell Reid (News Limited)

Pam Walkley (ACP Magazines)

Phillip Dickson (AAP) alternating with Bob Cronin (WA Newspapers)

John Dunnet (Country Press Australia) alternating with Bob Osburn (Community Newspapers Australia) and with Peter Owen (APN News and Media)

Panel of Public Members (8 members – 6 attend each meeting)

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Lisa Scaffidi (WA)

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Panel of Independent Journalist Members (2 members of whom 1 attends each meeting)

Prue Innes

Adrian McGregor

Journalist Member representing the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance

Alan Kennedy

Panel of Editor Members (2 members of whom 1 attends each meeting)

Warren Beeby

Gary Evans

Executive Secretary (non voting)

Jack R Herman

For details and biographies see:

<http://www.presscouncil.org.au/pcsite/about/members.html>