

From Dr Lisa Marzano
Submission to the IPSO consultation regarding the Editors' Code of Practice

Research has repeatedly shown that media reporting and portrayal of suicide can influence suicidal behaviour and lead to imitative acts, particularly when the coverage is extensive and sensationalist, and when overt description of the method(s) of suicide is included.

This submission makes six recommendations for improvement to clause 5 of the Editors' Code of Practice ("*When reporting suicide, to prevent simulative acts care should be taken to avoid excessive detail of the method used, while taking into account the media's right to report legal proceedings.*"), to strengthen the code in order to ensure more responsible media reporting, thus minimising the risk to vulnerable people:

- 1. To remove, or at the very least replace, the word 'excessive' in relation to the level of detail on suicide methods reported to ensure detailed descriptions of suicide methods are not included in reports.**

While it is now very rare to see 'excessive' detail, detailed descriptions containing sufficient information to clearly illustrate suicide methods are frequently reported. This level of detail increases cognitive awareness of specific suicide methods and can therefore contribute to increases in their use.

- 2. To add that specific method(s) should not be mentioned, or at the very least should be described in minimal detail, in cases involving highly lethal suicide methods (including railway suicides).**

In relation to specific suicide methods, including highly lethal ones such as jumping in front of a train or from a high bridge, the information needed to potentially 'replicate' a death can be fairly minimal and often well below the 'excessive detail' threshold. For example, providing the exact location of a bridge where a suicide has occurred, or the time and location of a rail suicide, could alert readers to times and locations (and 'fast train' lines) where an attempt is most likely to be lethal.

- 3. To add that specific method(s) should not be mentioned in cases involving novel or unusual suicide methods, including in the reporting of inquests.**

In its current form the Editors' Code of Practice is not robust enough to prevent the introduction and growth of new and emerging suicide methods in the UK. There is strong evidence demonstrating how new methods have caught on in some countries following widespread and detailed newspaper reporting, resulting in significant growth of these novel methods and increasing suicide rates overall.

- 4. To add that care should be taken to avoid generating coverage that is extensive, prominent or sensational – including stating the suicide method in the headline, speculating on possible causes and including images of known suicide locations. Particular care should be applied in cases involving young people (who may be at increased risk of imitative behaviour), and celebrities (where the risk of imitative behaviour through over-identification can be greater).**

In addition to reporting details of suicide methods, research also links prominent, sensational coverage of suicides with increases in suicide rates. It is also unhelpful to oversimplify, or trivialise a suicide by suggesting a single cause. Suicide is a very complex issue and is rarely, if ever, as a result of a single cause.

- 5. Greater care must be taken to avoid signposting vulnerable people to harmful content online, including videos showing suicidal behaviour and self-harm, guidebooks and websites which**

give instructions on suicide methods and promote suicidal behaviour, or any content which glorifies suicidal behaviour in any way.

Widespread news reporting of suicidal behaviour and harmful material available online can encourage people to search the Internet to view such content. The press should be reminded of its responsibilities under the code and as a trusted source of information. While potentially harmful content is available in the online environment, including social media, studies have shown increases in people viewing such material following widespread news reports which inadvertently signpost readers to these. Editors should give greater consideration to whether it is appropriate to run such stories.

6. Sources of support should always be included when covering the topic of suicide, and self-harm, such as Samaritans' 24hr helpline.

People can be significantly affected by reports covering sensitive topics including mental health and suicide. Therefore, news articles should always signpost readers to sources of support. Encouraging people to reach out for support in this way could help prevent suicides.