

Samaritans' submission to IPSO's public consultation to the Editors' Code of Practice

Samaritans is pleased to make a submission to this public consultation on the Editors' Code of Practice. This is a welcome opportunity to strengthen the code to ensure it supports journalists in producing the highest standards in relation to suicide coverage, based on the most up-to-date research into media reporting of suicide.

Suicide is a major public health concern and therefore a topic which is very much in the public interest. Sensitive reporting can inform and educate the public about suicide and the signs to look out for, highlighting that suicide is preventable and directing people to sources of support. An emerging body of research evidence, known as the 'Papageno' effect, has linked coverage of some types of information about suicide to falls in suicide rates, showing a preventative influence. Coverage that focuses on people seeking help and coming through difficult times serves as a powerful testimony to others that this is possible.

However, suicide is an extremely complex topic that presents a distinct set of challenges for journalists, who must balance reporting on a sensitive issue and informing the public while considering what influence coverage may have on vulnerable people, including the possibility of imitational suicidal behaviour.

Research from across the world has studied what is known as the 'Werther' effect. This research has consistently shown that media reports of suicide are associated with increases in suicide rates. The most recent and up to date summary of this research has shown that media reporting about celebrity suicides is associated with a 13% increase in suicide in the following 1-2 months. To put that in context, the UK currently has around 542 deaths by suicide per month. A 13% increase means there would be an additional 70 deaths per month following media coverage of a celebrity's death.

Certain types of news coverage of suicide, such as reports including explicit details of suicide methods, and coverage which is sensational and excessive, can lead to imitational suicide deaths. Again, the study mentioned above showed that when the media reported on specific suicide methods used by a celebrity, the increase in the number of deaths in the population was higher – an increase of 30%.

Samaritans' Media Advisory team works closely with the press to support responsible and informed coverage of suicide. We know from international research that when media guidelines are followed there is a positive effect on reporting of suicide.

Samaritans' submission to this consultation is based on the most significant areas of risk, demonstrated in the research evidence and data analysis of suicide reporting in the UK over the last decade.

This submission makes three key recommendations:

- to improve and strengthen clause 5
- to add a new clause around reporting of celebrity and high-profile suicides
- to add a new clause around signposting to harmful online materials.

We hope the Code Committee implements these recommendations to better support journalists in producing safer coverage of suicide, and to better protect the UK public against harmful press coverage.

Research references have intentionally been omitted from this submission due to the nature of content, these are available on request.

1. Recommendations to improve and strengthen clause 5

- a) **To remove, or at the very least replace, the word ‘excessive’ in relation to clause 5 covering the level of detail of suicide methods reported, to reduce the incidence of suicide methods being highly publicised in news reports, especially in headlines.**

It is very rare to see excessive details of suicide methods published in reports and it is indeed reassuring to see the code is effective in this area.

However, it is extremely concerning, given the substantial international evidence, that descriptions containing sufficient information to clearly illustrate suicide methods are frequently reported, including in headlines.

Inclusion of suicide methods in headlines has increased in the last five years, which is disappointing in view of journalists’ greater awareness of the risks associated with reporting this topic. It is also extremely concerning in terms of the risk of media coverage influencing imitational suicides. These details increase cognitive awareness of specific suicide methods and public perception of their effectiveness, contributing to increases in their use. It is important that the code does not confuse or mislead journalists around the risk of publishing details of suicide methods by the inclusion of the word ‘excessive’.

Samaritans, and other leading experts in the study of suicide reporting, believe this term is too broad, leaving far too much open to interpretation in relation to the greatest area of risk with media coverage of suicide.

- b) **To add an additional point to clause 5: “In cases involving novel or unusual and highly lethal suicide methods, no details of the method should be included in reports, including reports covering inquests.”**

In its current form the Editors’ Code of Practice is misleading and is not robust enough to prevent the introduction and growth of new suicide methods into the UK.

Very strong evidence exists which demonstrates how new methods have been introduced and rapidly increased in use in other parts of the world following widespread newspaper reporting. This has resulted in significant growth of these novel methods and increases in suicide rates overall.

Naming a suicide method which is new or relatively unusual in a news report is enough detail to promote the use of this method and risks it becoming more common in the UK, adding to deaths, not substituting for other methods.

Qualitative studies involving interviews with people who have survived suicide attempts, provide additional evidence that people learn about suicide methods from news reports, and that these details influence their perceptions of the accessibility and effectiveness of methods.

If a high profile person were to die by the use of a novel suicide method, the combination of excessive coverage containing details of the suicide method and the increased likelihood of people identifying with the deceased, could have catastrophic implications in terms of the impact on suicide rates.

People who survive a suicide attempt, and most do, get a second chance at seeking help and working towards recovery. Those who choose a highly lethal suicide method will get no second chance.

- c) **To add a further point to clause 5, reminding journalists that sources of support should be included in articles covering the topic of suicide and self-harm to encourage vulnerable people, who may be affected by the coverage, to seek help.**

People can be significantly affected by news reports covering sensitive issues, including mental health and suicide.

Due to the associated risk with media coverage and suicide contagion, news articles covering suicide should direct vulnerable audiences to where they can find help.

Samaritans monitors news reporting of suicide on a daily basis and our data shows that in recent years the number of articles which include references to support organisations has reduced.

Coverage that reminds people that suicide is preventable and focuses on help-seeking can have a protective effect by encouraging vulnerable people to reach out for help.

For every suicide there are many more suicide attempts. The World Health Organisation estimates that for every person across the world who dies by suicide, there may be more than 20 who make an attempt on their life.

This is a clear example of how the press can make a significant contribution to helping to reduce suicides with very little effort. People do contact Samaritans' helpline having been affected by stories in newspapers or magazines when the helpline details have been included in the piece.

2. Recommendation for an additional clause to be added to the editors' code covering reporting of celebrity and high-profile suicides

The likelihood of media coverage influencing imitational suicidal behaviour increases considerably following widespread reporting of celebrity suicides.

For example, in the 5 months following Robin Williams' suicide in 2014, there were almost 1,800 more suicide deaths in the USA compared to the same time period from the previous year – a 9.85% rise.

This contagious effect is well documented through numerous international studies which have analysed news reports and the corresponding impact on suicide rates. As mentioned earlier, the recently published review of 31 studies examining the impact of suicide reporting found that suicide rates consistently increase by approximately 10 to 18% following widespread reporting of celebrity suicides, and suicides using the same method as the celebrity increased by 30%.

Samaritans monitors and assesses news reporting of suicide on a daily basis and this data shows that in the case of celebrity suicides, the recommendations made in our media guidelines are frequently disregarded. This is extremely concerning given the greater level of risk.

In the majority of cases reports of celebrity deaths incorporate all of the following:

- details of the suicide method, often highlighted in headlines
- sensationalised or romanticised language and themes
- wild speculation of causes, which can over-simplify suicidal behaviour
- repeated, prominent stories, with coverage reaching excessive levels.

Each of these elements increases the risk of encouraging suicidal behaviour. In addition to this, in the case of celebrity or high-profile deaths, the risk of contagion through over-identification with the person who has died is increased.

Based on the strength of the extensive evidence, Samaritans is recommending that an additional clause be added to the editors' code, specifically relating to reporting of celebrity suicides.

We believe this addition will support journalists when preparing reports of celebrity deaths by providing clarity around the importance of safe, responsible coverage. As a direct consequence this would provide more robust protection to UK audiences, reducing the likelihood of increased suicide rates following celebrity deaths.

3. Recommendation to add a new clause to the Editors' Code: To avoid signposting people to harmful online content

Greater care must be taken to avoid signposting vulnerable people to harmful content online, including videos showing suicidal behaviour including 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 we are aware that 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.